

GANDHI'S HIND SWARAJ: ANALYZING IDEAS ON MODERNITY AND COLONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

'Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most-read writers of the 20th century. Gandhi's work and writing have many admirers as well as critics; his writings, in general, and Hind Swaraj in particular, have been interpreted in various ways. Some authors have called him an enemy of modernity, while others have interpreted him as a forerunner of post-modern thinking. What is essential here is to look at Gandhi not just as someone against modernity but as someone who provides us an alternate understanding of modernity.' By alternative understanding of modernity, I mean Gandhi understood modernity very differently from his contemporaries. He did not reject every idea linked to modernity, but he attacked the ills of modernity, most clearly its manifestation in Western civilization and institutions of modernity. Moreover, his critique of Western civilization should be considered a moral and cultural challenge to modernity.

His ideas of colonialism are also intermingled with his understanding of the ills of modernity, particularly the inherent obsession with material wealth that comes with Western modernity. Moreover, colonialism starts with economic and political control but goes further to colonizing consciousness. So, Gandhi's idea of Swaraj is not limited to political or economic freedom but also spiritual freedom of individuals or self-rule, which comes only with the decolonization of the mind.

Keywords: Post-modern, modernity, colonialism, swaraj.

INTRODUCTION

Gandhi wrote his Hind Swaraj in 1909 on his voyage from London to South Africa. There have been various attempts to understand and interpret Gandhi's intention in writing Hind Swaraj. However, one thing is clear as Gandhi himself writes in Hind Swaraj, "It has been written in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. I came in contact with every known Indian anarchist in London. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I feel that violence was no remedy for India's ills and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection" (Sharma n.d.). It is one of the aims Gandhi has stated clearly. However, another aim, not so clearly visible unless one reads the Hind Swaraj and other writings of Gandhi, is a moral critique of modern Western civilization from a superior Indian civilization. The Hind Swaraj is a critique of modernity and its ill effects manifested and brought home by the colonial state.

Before starting off the paper, I would like to state the primary aim of this piece. First, this paper will explain Gandhi's response to modernity and his understanding of civilization. Secondly, I will touch upon Gandhi's cultural challenge to the evil tendencies of modern Western civilization. Thirdly, the paper will try to elaborate on how Gandhi saw modernity and colonialism as two faces of the same coin. Finally, I will conclude the paper by elaborating on different elements of his idea of Swaraj, which include but are not limited to political freedom.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF MODERNITY AND CIVILIZATION

There are two ways of understanding modernity (and postmodernity). One is to look at them as phenomena located in a particular time and space, and the second is to look at them epistemologically (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006). The exact origin of modernity remains contested, but it is generally accepted to have originated in 17th-century Europe. Initially, modernity was limited to the ideas and practice of a few scientists and philosophers, particularly Descartes, Bacon, Newton, and Hobbes, but later it became widely accepted, even among the masses. There are many ideas and beliefs connected with modernity, some of which are – the

belief in human progress and the ability to control everything, the universal applicability of verifiable laws and regularities, the belief in absolute truth, the superiority of man to nature that is anthropocentrism, focus on the bodily welfare, separation of ethics or religion from science and politics, and the list goes on.

The development of science and technology in the modern age led to industrialization, urbanization, the development of warfare techniques, improved and faster means of communication and transportation, and ultimately, it also facilitated trade with remote nations and their colonization by Western countries. The Modernization theory, which originated from the ideas of theorists such as Max Weber and its subsequent systematic development by other theorists such as W.W. Rostow, was well accepted and promoted by the contemporaries of Gandhi, and it is still a dominant theory of development. The basic assumption of modernization theory is that there are certain precondition which has to be fulfilled to achieve the growth of a nation. These preconditions are nothing but the path followed by developed countries of today to get out of their underdeveloped state. If underdeveloped nations adopt the same path, they, too, can achieve growth.

To understand, what I mean by preconditions for national growth, one can refer to the works of W. W. Rostow. In his 1959 famous essay, titled *The Stages of Economic Growth*, he explained the five stages of economic growth in modern economic history: first traditional societies, second the precondition for the takeoff, third is take-off stage, fourth is drive to maturity and the final stage is high mass consumption (Rostow 1959). For our purpose, the second stage is relevant in which Rostow has explained the three preconditions for any society to tread on the path of growth. These preconditions are the following, development of social overhead capital, technological revolution in agriculture, expansion of imports with more efficient production. Additionally, according to Rostow, non-economic changes are required to support economic modernization. These include Willingness to Adopt New Techniques, Presence of Industrial Entrepreneurs, Effective National Government (Rostow 1959).

Gandhi's understanding of modernity was different from his contemporaries and, in a way, unconventional and unique. Gandhi saw modern Western civilization as a result of modernity. Instead of going into the nitty-gritty of the origin and development of the concept of modernity, he addressed the problems and ill effects of modernity most clearly reflected in modern Western civilization and colonialism. Gandhi's criticism of modernity should be understood as a moral and cultural challenge to the modern western civilization from a superior Indian civilization. To clarify my point, I would like to point out what Gandhi understood by 'civilization.' He states, "Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means "good conduct" (Gandhi 1938). It is clear how Gandhi's understanding of civilization from the dominant view of his time. He criticized the meaning for which the word civilization stands for. The primary goal of people living in the civilization is bodily welfare, and there is no connection to the mind. People live in better houses, wear machine-knitted clothes instead of animal skins, and possess better weapons. Those people not in the habit of all these, when become more like European they are called civilized. In this civilization, masses work in the most dangerous conditions for the sake of a few millionaires, and progress is measured by technological development.

Gandhi put it, "This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion. Its votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion. Some even consider it to be a superstitious growth. Others put on the cloak of religion, and prate about morality. But, after twenty years' experience, I have come to the conclusion that immorality is often taught in the name of morality... Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so" (Gandhi 1938).

As evident from the above para, Gandhi's challenge is moral and cultural. For Gandhi, Indian civilization is superior to modern Western civilization because the essence of Indian civilization lies in morality and the well-being of the mind instead of bodily welfare. Hence in the Hind Swaraj, Gandhi criticized modern professions such as doctors and lawyers, modern technology, and machineries such as railways and warfare technologies. Gandhi saw modernity's effect on the satisfaction of material wealth (*artha*) and desire (*kama*) but ignored the most important aspect of human life, which is *dharma* or the responsibility of man to the wider world. Modernity made reason and rationality its hallmark. In the modern age, scientific rationalism became the only method accepted to arrive at knowledge, and alternative modes were rejected. Moreover, everything acquired through this method was considered universal and absolute.

Gandhi's writing challenges these universal and absolute characteristics of modernity. Lloyd Rudolph has interpreted Gandhi's writing and work as postmodern. He understands Gandhi as an epistemological postmodern challenge to modernity. Unlike modernism, which believes in absolute and universal truth, Gandhi's writings reveal his belief in relative truth and truth in action. Gandhi believed that, at their best, humans could know partial and contingent truths based on their limited knowledge and in a particular situation. Gandhi, a believer in the Jain doctrine of *Anekantavada*, understood truth as multi-faceted and the understanding of truth by the human mind as momentary and fragmentary. Gandhi writes in his biography, *The Story of My Experiment with Truth*, 'I claim nothing (more for the experiments) than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought, and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them' (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006).

Gandhi also rejected the modern belief of separating religion/ethics from politics and ethics from science. He writes, 'Ours is a movement of self-purification. There are some who think that morality has nothing to do with politics. We do not concern ourselves with the character of our leaders. The democracies of Europe and America steer clear of any notion of morality having anything to do with politics' (Young India, 23-1-1930).

He writes further in another context, 'Human life being an undivided whole, no line can ever be drawn between its different compartments, not between ethics and politics. A trader who earns his wealth by deception only succeeds in deceiving himself when he thinks that his sins can be washed away by spending some amount of his ill-gotten gains on so-called religious purposes. One's everyday life is never capable of being separated from one's spiritual being. Both act and react upon one another (Harijan 30-3-1947, p. 85).

COLONIALISM AND GANDHI'S CULTURAL CHALLENGE

In Hind Swaraj, while answering the question, why was India lost? Gandhi writes, '..The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them.' Gandhi explained that Britishers came to India for trade, we assisted them, we were allured to their silver, and in the greed to become rich quickly, we welcomed the company with open arms. Our princes fought among themselves, Hindus fought with Muslims, and we were divided. Some Englishmen state that they held India on the sword, but Gandhi rejected such statements. Gandhi's challenge to the colonial state and its obsession with materialism should be seen as a cultural challenge from Indian civilization.

To understand Gandhi's challenge to the colonial state, one can invoke the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material spheres constructed by Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee argues that to challenge colonialism, anticolonial nationalist divided their culture into spiritual and material spheres (Chatterjee 1993). Similarly, Sudipta Kaviraj argues that historically in India, we could see that people permitted the state's interference in the secular domain but always resisted state authority, and the state also practiced restraints in the religious/spiritual domain (Kaviraj 2005). Gandhi also considered this dichotomy, but understood it in a completely unconventional way. Of course, the British Empire was superior in the material sphere to then-

existing India. However, for Gandhi, the material achievements are not worth considering when judging the superiority of a civilization. Material gains tell us nothing about the achievements of civilization; on the contrary, materialism for Gandhi was nothing more than the corruption of civilization. A civilization's gain must be weighed by looking at the spiritual gains made by the people. On these parameters, Indian civilization was far superior to modern Western civilization. While considering the separateness of these two spheres, Gandhi did not give any importance to material well-being. In Gandhi's view, it is because of the greed for wealth and concern for bodily well-being that modern Western civilization used means of violence and adopted immorality. Instead of any victory, colonialism has lost out on ethical grounds.

Gandhi said about the state, "the state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The Individual has a soul, but as the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence" (Mahatma Gandhi, *Modern Review* (October, 1935). Interview with Nirmal Kumar Bose (9/10 November 1934)).

As a philosophical anarchist, Gandhi saw even the worst anarchy as better than the best state and believed in Thoreau's maxim 'that state is best which governs the least'. Hence, Gandhi tried to create a self-reliant republic of villages.

THE TRUE SWARAJ

The decolonization drove the British out of Indian territory, copying their institutions such as parliament to govern and maintain our own army for protection from any potential threat in the future. This is not the true Swaraj Gandhiji wanted for India. Gandhi said in essence, it would mean 'that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English' (Gandhi 1938). Gandhi was staunchly against replacing English rulers with Indians while keeping the structure. Gandhi believed the reason for Indian slavery was our adoption of their civilization, which made foreign presence possible in India. Gandhi also believed that the whole of India was not touched; only those people who adopted Western civilization had become slaves. If they can free themselves, India can become free again. The experience of Swaraj, for Gandhi, has to happen at the Individual level; as Gandhi puts it, "it is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. . . there is no idea of sitting still. The Swaraj that I wish to picture is such that, after we have once realized it, we shall endeavor to the end of our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself" (Gandhi 1938).

Since these were Indians that individually who submitted to Western civilization and became colonized, it must be through us Individually that the Swaraj should come. Gandhi talked about the means through which swaraj has to be attained by India. He outrightly rejected brute force in favor of soul force. Now it is necessary to explain the meaning of these two different forces. Gandhi rejected brute force, the use of violent means to achieve India's freedom because of his belief in the theory of golden means. By using violent and impure means, we will get the same results. He likens the means to seed and ends to the tree and argues that there is an inviolable relation between seed and tree. The end in the form of the a depends on the seed you had sowed. As he summarizes, 'We reap exactly as we saw.'

To explain the meaning of soul-force, Gandhi gives an example of a petition and the possibility to use two kinds of force to back it up. First, we put our demand and threaten the authorities to use violent means. This kind of force Gandhi called body force or brute force. The second possibility is to submit the petition and declare, "...If you do not concede our demand, we shall no longer be your petitioners. You can govern us only so long as we remain the governed; we shall no longer have any dealings with you." The kind of force used in this case is what Gandhi called soul-force or love-force. According to Gandhi, soul force is more commonly but less accurately referred to as passive resistance.

According to him, passive resistance was a method of securing rights by personal suffering. Gandhi argued that it is using soul force when you refuse to do certain things, such as refusing to follow the law imposed on you because it is contrary to your conscience. If we use violence to force the government to repeal the law, it is body force, but if we refuse to follow the law and accept the penalty for its breach, we use the soul force. Self-suffering is indispensable in the use of soul force. However, the preliminary requirement for using soul force in achieving self-rule, it is the realization that it is immoral to follow an unjust law. As he put it, “if man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man's tyranny will enslave him. This is the key to Self-Rule or Home-Rule.”

Gandhi believed in the innate superiority of soul force over the force of arms. A passive resister is always ready for self-sacrifice. He criticized the extremist who uses the force of arms but follows all the laws; a coward, according to him, cannot disobey a law. In physical force, people do not have the courage required for soul force. He asks us, “wherein is courage required in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon, or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior — he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend, or he who controls the death of others?”. For Gandhi, anyone can indulge in passive resistance, the only requirement is the control of one over his mind. For Gandhi, ‘those who want to become passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness.’

Now, as we approach to the end of this paper, I would like to explain more plainly the meaning of Swaraj. Gandhi understood the effects of colonization on India and Indian civilization. He recognized that Britishers had exploited India politically and economically and also tried to destroy its social fabric. But modern civilization's most dangerous effect on India was on Indian minds. Besides political and economic colonialism, India had seen the colonization of minds. Hence, gaining political freedom from the Britishers would not make India free unless there is decolonization of the mind. As Ashis Sha put it, “Modern colonialism won its great victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order...To them, the new order looked like-and here lay its psychological pull, the first step towards a more just and equal world. That was why some of the finest critical minds in Europe-and in the East-were to feel that colonialism, by introducing modern structures into the barbaric world, would open up the non-West to the modern critic-analytic spirit” (Nandy 2006).

Some modernists like Nehru were so much illusioned by Western modernity and its development model that he sought to imitate the same model in India. The effect is visible in words such as brown Sahib and Brown Baboos. Gandhi preferred to use the word Swaraj instead of its English equivalent, freedom. Swaraj is a broadly inclusive term, it includes political, economic, social and moral development. But as Gandhi summarizes at the end of the Hind Swaraj, “Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control.” It is evident that for Gandhi gaining political freedom from the Britishers would not make India free unless there is freedom of mind and self-control.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, some of the Gandhian ideas on Swaraj can be enumerated here.

Self-control: For Gandhi, swaraj means ‘all around awakening- social, educational, moral, economic, and political’ (Young India, 26 August 1926).

True swaraj means self-control, control over the senses, control over worldly desires (*i.e. artha and kama*), and performance of one's duty or *dharma*. Much influenced by the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi believed in the doctrine of *anasakti* or moral and spiritual freedom. Gandhi saw the obsession with material wealth as the primary reason for the downfall of English civilization, and for that reason, Gandhi sought to create an Independent India which is not maligned by the same defects. For Gandhi, Swaraj is constituted by virtues of

self-rule and self-sacrifice, which must be rooted in the belief in individual autonomy and moral self-determinism.

For Gandhi, it is our moral duty to serve and work for the welfare of the downtrodden masses, and it is also connected with his idea of Sarvodaya. His concern for the upliftment of the masses led him to propose the notion of gram Swaraj. Gandhi's theory of oceanic circles can be cited here. Gandhi imagined a model of development where villages formed the building blocks of an autonomous republic. Gandhi was disaffected by the modern system of production, which led to the accumulation of wealth in a few hands and gross inequality for the masses. To remedy this, Gandhi gave his concept of trusteeship. By trusteeship, he means that people who have gained a substantial amount of wealth are not the sole owners of it. It is the responsibility and moral duty of the rich to look after the poor. To achieve an equitable distribution of wealth, he proposes measures like Bread Labour- the duty of every man to earn his bread by doing some manual work; Voluntary Renunciation, that is, the prohibition on accumulating beyond basic needs; the need for governmental action to ensure minimum wages for the workers; and resolution of agricultural and industrial disputes based on satyagraha and trusteeship. And the means to achieve swaraj as we have already seen, is soul-force.

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