

***Hind Swaraj* - A Critique of Modern Civilization**

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Abstract: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* or Indian Home Rule in 1909 aboard the SS Kildonan Castle on his way from London to South Africa. It has been a hundred and five years from then and still this little book finds new readers every day. *Hind Swaraj* has for long been hailed as Gandhi's diagnosis of modern civilization with both prognosis and prescription. The modern civilization which he discusses has assumed ever humongous proportions today. This article therefore is a re-reading of *Hind Swaraj* to understand the criticism of modern civilization offered by Gandhi. Does his criticism hold true today as well? Who does he blame? Was his criticism solely of the material interests which man was being lured into or was it also a strong evocation of the slipping away of individualism? This article shows that all along it was not machine or modernity which Gandhi truly despised as is usually believed. He offered a critique of modern civilization but through it he bemoaned and decried the loss of autonomy of the individual.

Keywords: autonomy, civilization, Gandhi, metanoia, modernity, soul.

INTRODUCTION

The first elaborate discussion of what Gandhi called 'The Modern Civilization' is found in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Gandhi however had spoken against modernity as early as 1894 when he was a part of the Esoteric Christian Union. In the tradition of a catechism, *Hind Swaraj* is a dialogue between 'the reader' who asks questions and Gandhi as 'the editor' who answers them. The book is therefore an amalgamation of the various question which Gandhi was pondering over and the answers which he sought for himself. In the Gujarati edition of the text Gandhi used the word '*sudharo*' and not the Hindi word '*sabhyta*' for civilization. The former meant to bring reform within oneself while the latter indicated a reform in the community as a whole. The choice of the word for civilization thereby put the onus of reform on the individual and not the community. Civilization to him was good conduct leading man to his path of duty. However, modern civilization or barbarism (*kudharo*) as he saw it had mistaken the very basis of the existence of man because here 'people made bodily welfare the object of life'[1]. The body was given primacy over the spirit and every effort was directed towards the glorification of the former. Modern civilization was produced by the Industrial revolution resulting in what Marx called a 'Capitalist society'. In this new hierarchized society, the emphasis was on the ends and not the means. Gandhi saw this as the major problem, the destruction of the spirit only for transient pleasures.

Modern civilization attacked self-restraint, self-satisfaction, moral welfare and ethical living. It was actually what Tolstoy called 'bondage masquerading as freedom'[2], bondage - of the soul.

DIAGNOSIS OF A CURABLE DISEASE:

Gandhi did not equate Europe or the West with modern civilization but merely saw it as a carrier of this 'Satanic' material modernity. He acknowledged the existence of true civilization even in the West in those hamlets and hinterlands which were as yet untouched by the influence of industrial society. The villages had their own problems but Gandhi believed that they could be remedied. He advocated not hating the enemy, in this case the British but the evil i.e. modernity or modern civilization. But this did not mean turning a blind eye to the faults of the evil-doers. They had to be moved to reclaim their individuality. He was also realistic as he knew that modern civilization could not be done away completely. It therefore needed to be limited on ethical and moral grounds. Gandhi was critical of modern civilization because he knew that it was 'not an incurable disease'[3]. The English people were temporarily afflicted by it and Gandhi had the diagnosis as well as the prescription for the same.

Modern civilization was aggressive, violent, restless, imperialist, exploitative, brutal, and lacked a sense of direction and purpose. It privileged the

body, neglected the soul, misunderstood the powers of reason and negated the individual spirit[4]. It addressed *arth* (interests or wealth) and *kama* (desires) but not *dharma* (duties or responsibilities)[5]. It claimed to lead the way to a progressive future backed by science and reason. Gandhi challenged this confidence and provided an alternative through traditions. But even traditions had to be purified of the inherent evils like untouchability, child marriage, widow immolation, etc. The hallmarks of modern civilization were obsession of the body, machinery, technology, speed, western education, means of transportation and communication, violence, naive rationalism, statist politics, and consumption or indulgence.

Modern civilization privileged the body and focussed on self-interest and acquisitiveness. Body for Gandhi was both a seat for individualism and a seat for desire. Materialism led to consumption with the onslaught of cheap goods and men became 'slaves to new desires'. The market doled out new goods and created artificial necessities and demands. Profit, power, capital, greed, gluttony, selfishness and ruthless competition were a direct result of this. Thus, the 'measure of worth and significance, in effect made things in place of man the arbiter and locus of value'[6]. This was symptomatic of a Civilization where profits were appropriated by a few and a small minority controlled the vast majority. Little or no value was attached to moral regulation of desires, self-discipline, self-restraint and honest dealings.

Gandhi's political-moral thought and action were geared towards destroying this soul-less system. The quest was not how much one could acquire but how much could one forego. The destruction of the Indian community with its myriad traditions through materialism needed to be stopped. But most of all the loss of the autonomy of the individual needed to be addressed. Man was to be the master of his soul not a servant to his material desires.

THE PRESCRIPTION:

Gandhi believed that some machinery and simple technology were good. Machines were indispensable when there was a shortage of labour. They brought efficiency and relieved drudgery. They were to be used in limits though. Modern civilization had a penchant for creating cheap consumer goods in bulk to maximize profit. This fetish was at the cost of human labour resulting in poverty, oppression and exploitation. Manual labour was looked down upon as fit only for the uneducated. The leisure created often resulted in sloth in the absence of a moral theory to regulate life. Gandhi wanted machines to supplement manual labour and not supplant it. He was in favour of machines like

the clock, *charkha*(spinning wheel), sewing machine, bicycle, lathe, etc. which were an aid to the people. He wanted the machines to operate side by side with traditional handicrafts. He regarded the human body as the most complex machine. It was obvious that if the machine was in disuse, it would rust. Manual labour kept the body disciplined and at the same time was a hallmark of equality, a befitting reply to the capitalist system which created a rift between the haves and the have not, the former who minted money and the latter who laboured.

Gandhi was wary of a technocracy which hierarchized the relations between man and nature as well as between those who possessed technology and those who did not. Technology could be a major contribution if it was directed towards the material benefit of all. Its value lay as much in its symbolism as the purpose to which it was used. For example, the *khadi* programme for self-consumption was an innovation in its own right. The aim was to decentralize power, bring in self-sufficiency, and symbolize non-alienated labour, pre-modern technology and the autonomy and the dignity of the individual. The human cost of any new technology had to be carefully considered.

Literacy, Gandhi argued was only necessary to the extent that it developed thinking power and taught one to distinguish between good and evil [7]. He emphasized on vocational education which helped one to become self-sufficient. His focus was on practical knowledge and not mere theory. He stressed on manual labour and discarded the western education system which he thought was ill-equipped to meet the traditional needs. A blanket adaptation of western standards and sensibilities was incompatible with the very different Indian system and hence detrimental to it.

Modern civilization with its fascination for speed and mindless activity alienated man from his social roots and his environment. New modes of transport and communication replaced each other resulting in a disjunction with real time and space. The bonds of mutuality were replaced by indifference and hostility. This resulted in more free time which was whiled away. There loomed a general sense of disconnect and loss of identity. This fake dynamism shook the moral foundations of the society, compromised self-sufficiency, increased crimes and made a mockery of pilgrimage. In a disjointed society people replaced morality and virtues with impersonal rules to maintain the charade of civility. The fear or threat of one another led them to camouflage their insecurities behind a veil of aloofness. The mad tempo of life left no room for introspection and made man a mere automaton.

Gandhi believed that the development of irrigation was more important than that of railways. The railways facilitated the movement of food but did not produce food and hence were extravagant. Moreover they increased segregation, stepped up the frequency of famines, carried plague germs and made centres of pilgrimage accessible to all. It contributed to the uprooting of people from their traditional roots. Gandhi refuted the claim that railways ushered in a sense of nationalism in India; instead they brought in their wake fear, insecurities and avarice. Gandhi was the best known third class train passenger and he did benefit from the railways. But at this time railway lines were laid not to connect people but to connect hinterlands with cities and towns for commercial purposes. He argued that the funds used for laying railway lines needed to be used in sectors which could make a difference to people's lives in more fundamental terms.

SCIENCE AND VIOLENCE:

Gandhi saw violence at the core of modern civilization. Imperialism, slavery, world wars, civil wars and holocaust are some of the obvious examples. But there was also violence against nature as the callous exploitation of resources and the remorseless killing of animals showed. Modern man played havoc with nature to meet his ever increasing material demands. Animals were and are still killed for fun, sport or medical experimentation. Violence was exercised by individuals, communities or states be it in verbal, emotional, psychological, or physical forms. Man thus lost out on his compassion and empathy. It was the blind application of modern technology and science which eroded men of their humaneness.

Modern civilization with its predilection for secular science, reason and negation of faith overreached itself. It sanctioned Brahmanism and neglected the folk and the non-literate. Science reduced everything to narrow objectivities ignoring consciousness as romantic and irrational. It gave validity to the 'White man's burden' claim with its attendant notions of Indians as young, naive, effeminate/feminine natives who needed to be civilized by the superior, virile, masculine British. Gandhi not only defied this view but also reinterpreted it by collating maleness with femininity[8].

Gandhi was critical of doctors who encouraged indulgence through their preventive and curative medication. He believed in placing limitations on the remedies for keeping the body alive[9]. With the doctor's intervention, the body might feel more at ease but the mind he said was weakened[10]. After 1920, Gandhi accepted science on his terms. He felt that science was not bad as long as humans took control of the process rather than

being controlled by it[11]. Humanity had to impose checks on science and see that policies benefitted ordinary people[12].

REASON AND RATIONALISM:

Gandhi valued reason but was critical of rationalism. Reason is exercised by an individual but rationalism is standardized by the society. Rationalism which is hierarchical, valued only scientific knowledge. This knowledge belonged to the West and therefore rationalism was imperialistic. It did not acknowledge its own constraints, ignored individuality and advocated one single notion of life. It even dismissed religion as superstition. Gandhi pointed out that experiences like religion could not be rationalized but instead required faith. Reason itself was insufficient in itself and needed guidance from wisdom, conscience, intuition and tradition on moral and political issues[13].

"I plead not for the suppression of reason, but an appreciation of its limits"[14].

PROGRESS AND HISTORY

Gandhi was hostile to the notion of social evolutionism and as a result rejected the ideas of history and progress. He regarded neither space nor time as a pure category. He preferred myths over history or the *puranas* over *itihasa* [15]. He remarked, "History, as the chronicle of violence, ignores the 'natural activities' of individuals. It does not record the day to day incidents of love and service[16]. History for him was an aberration, a break, 'an interruption of peace'[17]. It claimed a certain conceit to predict the future and become the voice of the past but failed miserably in both. He was also critical of the idea of stages of growth which saw the less modernized as less civilized or savage and thereby invoked the metaphor of the adult versus the child. India would always remain backward on the civilization scale and the British would take on the role of the guardian courtesy of this view. Gandhi rejected the falsity of this model.

BUREAUCRACY AND POLITICS

The modern bureaucratic centralist state was a product of modern civilization too. It not only monopolized political power but also the use of violence. This was 'tyranny perpetrated upon a people in the name of the people'[18]. The modern economy favouring the elite compromised the minimum basic needs of the poor. This often resulted in legitimate discontent which was efficiently curbed by the state apparatus. In a globalizing context state also protected overseas investments. State appropriated morality and expected the citizens to conform to its notion of right-wrong, legal-illegal and laws-duties. While liberalism was the prerogative of industrialized

societies, imperialism and colonialism was the lot for the 'non-civilized'-'non-industrialized'. For the latter it was a rule of conquest and not consent. Democracies were a bane as well, allegiances kept changing and no long term sensible decisions were taken. State was a monopoly of the influential few and worked in their interest. Gandhi advocated the substitution of power politics by goodness politics through the integration of the ends and the means.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

Gandhi did not reject modern civilization totally. He praised its scientific spirit of enquiry which he saw as a search for truth, intellectual inquisitiveness and scrutiny of established attitudes. However it was important to bear its limits in mind and not apply it to everything. He was appreciative of man's understanding of the natural world. The progress made in the field of medicine(not surgery), sanitation and prediction-management of natural hazards was seen as real progress. Preservation of life was important but it was not the most important goal in life to the extent of developing a fear psychosis of death. Gandhi deeply valued the civic virtues like punctuality, respect for people and rules, liberty, equality, religious toleration, liberation of women from tradition, public morality, and upholding the collective interest. But modern civilization operated these in a faulty framework. The correct way of appreciating these values was to be aware of their limitations and to test things on the scale of morality, autonomy, diversity and faith. In Gandhi's worldview East and West were one. There was no difference between the cultures, difference lay in politics and societies.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's rejection of modernity was based on a mix of ethics and knowledge. Values, needs and reasons were intertwined in his judgement of a civilization. Modern civilization as he saw hampered soul-growth, moral welfare and was an end in itself. In opposition to it he developed his concepts of trusteeship, *sagpan*(kinship), *aparigraha*(non-possession), *asteya*(non-covetousness), *asahayoga*(non-cooperation), *satya*(truth), *satyagraha*(truth-force) and *ahimsa*(non-violence). He knew that a perfect system was not possible and hence the quest had to go on. The outside demons had to be challenged but more fundamentally the evils inside needed to be expunged. Each action had to be judged by the costs involved. The myth of the modern civilization knowing what is best had to be dissolved by an assertive man who safeguarded his autonomy.

The criticism offered by Gandhi holds true today as well. The mad rush for nuclear technology keeps the whole world on tenterhooks. Resources are being directed towards arms and ammunitions while many do not get two square meals a day. Animals are killed and tortured in the name of scientific experimentation both for medical science and other sectors like the cosmetic industry. The means of transport have disrupted the joint family structure. The means of communication have made inter-personal communication redundant. Physically and emotionally families are distant now. Democracy is rule of the people, by the people, and for the people only in name. It has degenerated into syndicalism. There is still racial profiling and division of the world into the developed and the under developed. Consumerism, obesity, and sloth are also a result of the market. Vocational education has lost out to academic curriculum. People are gradually distancing themselves from their own culture all in the name of progress. But is it actually progress? We are consciously adopting only those aspects of this modern civilization which brings only harm to us. The autonomy of the individual is lost amidst the rationality of the collective. Man has surrendered his soul to the lure of modernity. The incorporation of new cultures, ideas, and ways of living is good only so long as it is not imposed or does not compromise what is one's own. The spirit needs to be liberated to choose for itself from what is on offer rather than giving in to popular pressure.

Hind Swaraj was Gandhi's prescient appraisal of the coming future. His thought and life calls for what Saran calls a metanoia – 'a complete transformation of man's thinking and way of life, social as well as individual'. We all need to explore our own individual selves and Gandhi is an apt example for the same. He did not relinquish his dream or utopia of a 'normal society' i.e. 'one with an intelligible order and an overall purpose'[19]. He saw through 'the West's Faustian compact with modernity' [20].

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