

*Relevance of
Gandhi's critique of
Modern Civilization and its institutions*

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Introduction:

We are meeting here in the Institute of Gandhian Studies on a historic occasion. Exactly one hundred years ago, Gandhi penned down his thoughts on the real meaning of Swaraj for India. Many people ignored this book; some opposed without reading it; and some others violently disagreed with Gandhi and ridiculed it. Some others considered that Gandhi was a representative of the bygone ages. Even some of the close followers of Gandhi like Jawaharlal Nehru did not agree with him. Gandhi's "political Guru" Gokhale felt that Gandhi would revise his thoughts over the years. The Communist leaders like Dange and M.N. Roy were critical of Gandhi from the Marxian angle of Class struggle.

Thus the book of *Hind Swaraj* was either criticized or ignored. Many people did not have access to the book as it was banned by the Government the moment it was published in Gujarati and the ban was finally lifted only in 1938 during the Congress rule. During the freedom movement the copies of *Hind Swaraj* were sold defying the Government ban.

The book received some what warm reception only in America for its novelty. The American edition of *Hind Swaraj* was published with the title "*Sermon on the Sea*", reminding the readers the "*Sermon on the Mount*" centuries ago. The reaction in England was cautious. The book was translated into some Indian languages.

Congress did not give adopt the Gandhian model of economic development:

On the whole the book suffered benign neglect within the Congress circles as the Congress primarily subscribed to the political and social agitations of Gandhi, but not to Gandhi's plan of national reconstruction. The differences came to the fore on many occasions. The correspondence between Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in early 1930s on economic development of Post-Independent India was published in a book entitled "*A Bunch of Letters.*" It clearly revealed that the Congress and, in particular Jawaharlal Nehru, whom

Gandhi considered as his political heir, was forth right in condemning Gandhian approach of economic development Jawaharlal Nehru said that the future development of India was intricately interconnected with the Western Industrial and political model. Nehru did not mince matters and he was forthright in condemning Gandhian prescription for national reconstruction in after Independence.

On the eve of political Independence, the differences between Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru came to the fore once again on the issue of which road to social revolution and in particular, economic development. Even while the framing the Indian Constitution the Constituent Assembly did not consider the Gandhian option. The Constitution makers opted for Western democratic model. When the Draft Constitution was prepared it was pointed out by some critics. Reacting to the criticism, Rajendra Prasad, Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, urged B.N. Rau, the Constitutional Adviser to remodel the Constitution on the lines of Democratic decentralization. But B.N. Rau politely declined to do so and reaffirmed his faith in the Western model. Thus the Congress never even considered seriously Gandhian model of economic development. It is to be remembered that Srimannarain prepared and published the *Gandhian Constitution*.

The Origin of *Hind Swaraj*:

Exactly one hundred years ago on November 22, 1909 Gandhi completed writing the book *Hind Swaraj*. It was written in ten days 13-22 Nov. 2009 on board the ship *Kildoman Castle* on his return trip from England to South Africa.

The Context:

In the book Gandhi addressed some basic issues that were confronting the contemporary society, in particular the rising trend of violence and terrorism. Some of the Indians abroad were also attracted towards violence and they advocated violent revolution in India.

But Gandhi was firmly opposed to the growing trend of terrorism and violence. Gandhi was in search of a higher alternative to violence and terrorism. He firmly believed that India's future was intricately interconnected with peaceful social change.

By that time the British were firmly rooted in the Indian soil and they were spreading their tentacles in all aspects of life. The Introduction of railways, legal system, medicine and education began to change the nature of Indian society.

Gandhi examined the nature of British Colonialism. He went into the root of the problem. In the process he realized that the real problem lies the modern civilization itself. He considered that Modern civilization is much more inimical than the colonialism. He considered that root of the troubles in India lay in the adoption of modern civilization itself.

He juxtaposed modern civilization with the ethical living. He strongly felt that the strength of India and the Orient lies in its ethical living. Preserving and enhancing the moral character of its people and the institutions was of paramount importance for him.. But how we convince people about the evils of the modern civilization? Because, even the educated started believing in the modern civilization.

He felt that India was degrading and destroying itself by accepting and emulating the Western institutions

Gandhi firmly believed that the Western civilization and the rise of violence were inseparable. He strongly felt that nonviolence and factory civilization were incompatible and they cannot co-exist.

In order to convey his message, in *Hind Swaraj* he adopted the method of a dialogue between a Reader (of a magazine) and the Editor. It is significant to note that Gandhi did not adopt the traditional model of conversation between a Guru and Sishya. Gandhi thus avoided the hierarchical problem and the feeling of preaching to some one. The dialogue was between two equal partners for exchange of views on problems that confront the contemporary society. He explored how to arrive at an amicable solution so that India would again its pre-eminent position in the comity of nations. He firmly convinced that the real strength is not in its military might. India's greatness is closely linked with its ethical behaviour. Gandhi clearly realized that politics have an important place in resolving people's problems in a nation. But his conception of politics was that they serve people, but not dominate over people

Gandhi believed in nationalism and he also realized its strength in solving its problems. But his conception of nationalism was not a hindrance to the development of International peace and amity.

He wanted to clarify the meaning of swaraj. For Gandhi swaraj was the quest for self improvement. Hind Swaraj means “rule of dharma” in an ideal state. In it simplicity was the crux of the matter. Without simplicity there cannot be any ethical living and fellow feeling. Gandhi clearly felt that the modern civilization destroys ethical living as it built on the acquisition of material wealth. The mad rush for wealth destroyed the moral fiber of the people. The acquisitive nature will retard the development of the personality of the individuals. Ethical living and morality that cements and brings cohesion in society. Gandhi felt that these qualities are missing in the modern Western Civilization as it haps on acquisition of wealth by any means.

Just like Rousseau wanted to go back to nature, so also Gandhi wanted that people should rediscover their ethical and moral moorings for a quality of life.

How to eradicate poverty:

The other major consideration of Gandhi was how to eradicate poverty. Poverty is the bane of India’s progress. All are born equal and hence they should live equal. He stressed that only through simple living and fellow feeling as well as equal distribution that poverty can be reduced. If there is no poverty, there will be no suffering and peace and tranquility will prevail. In an acquisitive society poverty cannot be eliminated and the gap between the rich and the poor would be further widened. **Gandhi’s life mission was to rehumanize the dehumanized society.** In one word, Gandhi wanted culture, but not civilization as it is the root cause of all evils in the modern society. Every one’s basic needs must be met. No one should go hungry, or without shelter.

Evils of factory civilization

Gandhi realized that the factory civilization which is the hall mark of modern civilization, in fact, reduces the value of the human being. Gandhi, thus, had a fundamental objection to industrialization as it widens the gap between the rich and the poor and industrialization breeds hatred and alienation. Both Gandhi and Marx were concerned with the problem of alienation. Marx thought that class struggle would end alienation and it would ultimately lead to harmony in society. On the other hand, Gandhi was well aware that class struggle would lead to violence and confrontation as well as hatred. It would further perpetuate alienation in one form or the other. Gandhi firmly believed in the process of reconciliation of conflicts in a peaceful way.

Gandhi was also well aware the evils of centralization—centralization of power and positions and leading to acquisition of power by a few at the expense of the teeming millions of people.

Gandhi was also opposed to industrialization as it would contribute the growth of cities and destruction of the harmonious life in the rural surroundings. In the cities slums and shanties are invariable. In cities and towns the inequalities are much more glaring and the exploitation would go unabated.

We should not forget that Gandhi was well aware of positive contribution of the Western civilization, such as rule of law and constitutionalism. Civil liberty, equality, rights, and economic development were some of its positive gains. But Gandhi realized that modern civilization is based of competition and acquisition of wealth and concentration of power.

Hence, the positive gains are small, compared to the evils it perpetuates.

Gandhi wanted to combine rights with duties, empirical knowledge with moral right, economic development with spiritual progress, religious toleration with freedom of, or from, religious belief and women's liberation with a broader conception of humanity.

Quality of life:

In the modern civilization man is becoming a slave of the machines. Machines overtake men. The West equates “Civilization” with the progress of industrialization. The West divides the world as “Civilized and non-civilized,”—the haves and have-nots. But Gandhi’s yardstick for progress was quite different.

Gandhi’s Conception of civilization is not rights based, duty based. “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.”

Where there is no poverty that is happiness; where there is no discrimination that is happiness; where people have contentment that is happiness. In other words, Gandhi was concerned with the improvement of quality of life rather than quantitative development.

Colonialism and Capitalism:

Gandhi felt that modern civilization is at the root of the colonial problem. When Lenin connected colonialism to capitalism, Gandhi linked colonialism to modernity itself. Gandhi came to the conclusion that the Western Civilization was based on brute force. Gandhi opined that even for West, modernization is an evil, and in the case of India and the Orient, it is worse. Gandhi saw that colonialism as the fruit of modern civilization. This truth must be grasped by all.

Gandhi was also clear on one point. Morality is far superior to any constitution or positive law.

Eradication of poverty is Gandhi’s major concern:

Gandhi was opposed to poverty. How to eradicate poverty is his main concern. He realized that the Indian middle class was aping the West and clamoring to develop India on the Western industrial model. They want to ape England and Japan or Italy. Hence, Gandhi examined in his books the conditions of life in those countries and came to the conclusion that their model is unsuited to Indian conditions. Gandhi also analyzed the historical causes and consequences of British rule in India.

Hind Swaraj is divided into 20 sort chapters.—11 chapters deal with historical reflection and 9 with philosophical thought. Ruskin's *Unto this last* had profound impact on Gandhi. Similarly, Thoreau's concepts on Civil Disobedience.

In his philosophical reflections Gandhi dealt at length about the Nature of Swaraj and of civilization. He highlighted the futility of violent revolutions and harped on nonviolent social change which he considered as sound means to attain Independence. He was very much concerned about the youth and highlighted the need for educational reforms.

He appealed to Indians to adopt technology appropriate to Indian needs and he vehemently opposed industrialization on the Western Industrial model. Gandhi also gave a series of practical proposals to moderates, extremists, the new middle class and the English. He was of the firm opinion that Innovated and renovated Indian civilization alone can attain swaraj. Gandhi also made a clear distinction between Swaraj as a self rule and swaraj as self government or home rule.

Many of the philosophical and practical concepts which he enunciated in an embryonic form in *Hind Swaraj*, were later elaborated during his struggles and also in developing the Constructive programme. Gandhi was ever receptive to new ideas in his life time. But what strikes most is the consistency with which he advocated the key concepts in his life.

After one hundred years when we look back into the concepts and contents of *Hind Swaraj*, we find its remarkable relevance. Gandhi was well aware of the fact that understanding grows of misunderstanding. He was not afraid to be in the minority of one. What matters most to him is truth. Truth shall prevail: truth, and nothing but truth, that was important for him. For him truth is not abstract, but a concrete reality. Adherence to truth, that matters. What he felt right, he had no hesitation to propagate the same.

Unbridled exploitation in the Post-Colonial world:

In this post-colonial period, people see and feel some of the stark realities of the Capitalist system. In the modern Industrial world, the disparities between the rich and the poor have grown. On many fronts man or woman is dispensable. Profit is the god of modern capitalism. Consumerism is all pervasive. Unbridled exploitation of nature is resulting in the environmental changes and even leading to climate change. With the collapse of the socialist system, capitalism in its stark naked form is exploiting the people. The multinationals rule the

roost. National states lost their real sovereignty. They have to play to the tune of the capitalist giants. People started feeling the pinch of the modern civilization as development is at the expense of the millions of human beings. Modern civilization is affecting the value systems of the people. The people in the less developed world are aping the Western Industrial model and in the process they have become the internal colonies of the Western capitalist system.

Culture and agriculture go together. When the farms are mechanized and produce only commercial crops where is the autonomy of the peasant? The invisible hands dictate the terms. The Marxist model of the development based on class struggle lost its luster. Capitalism turns into a monolith god—all pervasive and affecting the values and morals of the people at large. Corruption and dishonesty rule the roost.

Restoration of moral values is a must

In such a dismal situation Gandhi appears to be a beacon light even to some people in the West. Gandhi provided an alternate model of development. His method of satyagraha appears to be a most potent force as it gives enormous scope for individual action as well as non-cooperation with evil. Gandhi harped on restoration of moral values and he made human being as the measure of development. His emphasis on purity of ends and means and openness of methods is gaining importance. The rights based approach has reached a dead-end. If not today, in the years to come people will look to Gandhi as the answer as he emphasized on duties and human values.

When Gandhi described the European civilization as a seven-day wonder, many thought that it was a hyperbole. Gandhi was dubbed by some as the representative of the by-gone ages. But now, after hundred years, people started listen to the lone voice of Gandhi as sane and sensible.

Gandhi's greatness lay in the fact that he was a builder of alternatives. He was never content with mere criticism or condemnation. For him human is the measure of all things.

The welfare of all, or the Sarvodaya is not merely a dream, but also a blue print for future action.

What Gandhi requires today is reinterpretation of his thought in the light of changed circumstances. The world is slowly, but steadily marching towards a post religious society. Morality is not divinely ordained, it is a social necessity. It is not blind faith but adherence to secular values, that would solve many problems in the world. Individual freedom seasoned with social responsibility will lead to collective action. When all systems collapse due to unbridled corruption, it is the individual initiative that would bring a sea

change in the situation. The centenary of *Hind Swaraj* is yet another opportunity to think in terms of alternatives to the present system which is enable to develop full personality of the individuals.

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