

Gandhi's Critique of Modernity

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Abstract: In Gandhi, we find a severe critic of modern civilization. It is interesting to note that many of the criticisms of modernity raised by contemporary Western thinkers have already been raised by Gandhi earlier. He exposes the inconsistencies of modernity and its lack of spiritual depth. It creates violence and reduces wisdom to rationality. Gandhi's dislike towards modern civilization extended to all its aspects: modern technology, machine, western social institutions, particularly those pertaining to law and medicine. This paper would present the Gandhian views on modernity.

Keywords: Modernity, Western Civilization, *Swaraj*, Culture, *Swadeshi*

Western culture began in Ancient Greece and developed in the Roman civilization till the start of the middle ages. Its continued progression fructified into the Scientific and Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, and thus to what is today the modern civilization. Modernity embodies a set of beliefs and practices that shapes both individual and collective lives. It has often been seen in terms of the ideas of liberty, equality, progress and rationality. Later on these concepts get expressed in the two political doctrines of liberalism and socialism.¹ Since its inception modernity has been spreading all over the world with or without colonial conquest. In some places and at sometimes it has been welcomed as providing a whiff of fresh air and a liberating force that frees us from oppressive traditions. However, it is also perceived by its opponents as inimical to cultural freedom and material well-being, and hence to be resisted. In other words, it has virtually divided the world and many nations in the world into two camps: protagonists and antagonists. In Indian context we find the mainstream response to be rich in complexity and variety, though there may be some who took extreme positions.²

Since Gandhi's Education was in London, he was aware of modern western culture. He is critical of modernity for a number of reasons, but above all for its lack of spiritual depth and reducing wisdom to rationality. His opposition to modernity is rooted in the perceived conflict of values that he held dear and what he saw was embodied in modern culture. But before proceeding to Gandhi's critique of modernity, we start the discussion by analysing three basic terms viz., pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity which would frequently occur in the paper.

Pre-modern, Modern, and Postmodern

In plain language, the term 'tradition/premodernity' is used to indicate the way of life of any people/group/institution/association which goes on from generation to generation without being marked by any radical change.³ Pre-Modern European society was overtaken by three major intellectual revolutions viz. the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In historical terms, it refers to the European society as it existed prior to 16th/17th century. Similarly, the simple meaning of modernity is taken to be the recent developments as against what existed in the past. Herein the emphasis is on the radical change rather than on continuity in terms of values, world view, customs and technology etc. To put it more succinctly, it symbolises the changed and new way the people think, live and act. Once again, in historical terms, it refers to the transition of the European society from medieval times to the modern times that occurred from the seventeenth century onwards. Essentially, modernity came to be associated with the rise of concepts like secularism (this worldliness as against the other worldliness), instrumental rationality and its concomitants, scientific and technological revolutions, democracy with its emphasis on life, liberty and fraternity of the people, the instillation of the state as the final arbiter of human affairs, and the egocentric concept of man with primary emphasis on his self-interest.

The entire process started in the wake of the Renaissance around 14th /16th century. Some of the important figures were Petrarch, Dante, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and others. Renaissance was marked by a process of revival of art,

music and literature based on classical pattern of Roman and Greek tradition. The process was refined and strengthened by other two revolutions of Reformation and Enlightenment.⁴ Reformation was related to the movement led by Martin Luther for radical reform in the Roman Catholic Church. It led to the emergence of the Protestant sects within Christianity. Enlightenment refers to a new intellectual movement in 17th /18th century Europe, which underlined the centrality of human reason, scientific knowledge, individualism and firm faith in the concept of continuous progress and rejection of traditional belief-system. It had its intellectual roots in writings of Descartes, Locke and Newton and its prominent exponents included Kant, Goethe, Voltaire, Rousseau and Adam Smith.

Post-modernity/post-modernism refers to another intellectual movement, which has come up in the later part of the 20th century. Basically, it marks a point of distinct departure from the modernist project both in terms of their intellectual foundation and institutional set-up. Post-modernist thinkers have their own views on art, literature, architecture and criticism including literary criticism; its prominent proponents are Robert Venturi, Jean Baudrillard, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Bernard Leon Foucault, J. Habermas and others. They are greatly distrustful of the grand narratives/grand theories/ ideologies.⁵ The post-modern thinkers have their own views on hermeneutics and they believe that there is no fixed meaning in a text. Hence, reading a text is more like tracing the 'process of constant flickering rather than counting the beads in a necklace'. This is so because meaning in any text is not fixed and as such it could not be nailed down.⁶

Zygmunt Bauman traces the inherent pessimism of the post-modern approach to the Holocaust, taken as an outcome of modernity. Essential elements of modernity, i.e., positivism, scientism and instrumental rationality acted as facade for the use of extreme and arbitrary violence against indigenous societies and cultures that did not adapt to the Western ideas of progress. In propagating the creed of 'progress', modernity came out with its destructive consequences.⁷

In today's world, man with consolidated effect of modernity, is understood as a rational autonomous individual endowed with free will. He is completely individualistic, self-centred, egoistic, screaming for more and more power, wealth and social status. He is nowhere near the spiritual meaning of life. MacIntyre in his discussion of the contemporary scene observes:

...modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public life, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms.⁸

Ramin Jahanbegloo adds:

Moreover, the social dynamics no longer demands conduct in which human relationships are informed by virtues. Modernity which brought freedom from the authority of various non-secular traditions went too far and liberated the hidden greed lying curled up in the human heart. In this culture of greed-satisfaction, rational violence plays a role in the process of ideological brainwashing and the marginalization of those who refuse to surrender to power relations of dominant epistemic discourse. In short, the modern dynamic of civilizing process has created a close link between the modern individual personality and the political formation of the modern state.⁹

Attack on modernity has come from various sources. Karl Marx considered it to be an ideology of the capitalist system which is sought to be made palatable by means of ideas like dignity of individual, democracy, secularism etc. Hannah Arendt is a socio-political critic of modernity. In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* she seeks to show how at the heart of modern society lies a contradiction¹⁰. On the one hand it swears by democracy, but on the other, by destroying the traditional glue that holds individuals together, it produces free floating, rootless individuals who are vulnerable to manipulation by authoritarian regimes which give them a spurious sense of meaning¹¹. Some sociologists call this

phenomenon “homelessness in cosmos” due to religious crisis occurred in the present era¹².

Gandhi's Views on Modernity

In considering Gandhi's response to modernity two points need to be noted. First, since modernity arose in the West and came to India from the West, some of his comments on Western civilization are actually comments on modernity. Consider the following example:

While the mission schools of other denominations very often enable the natives to contract all the terrible vices of the Western civilization, and very rarely produce any moral effect on them, the Natives of the Trappist mission are patterns of simplicity, virtue and gentleness. It was a treat to see those saluting passers-by in a humble yet dignified manner.”¹³

Second, there is no doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was a sever critic of modernity. In Gandhiji's own words “Hind Swaraj is a severe condemnation of modern civilization”.¹⁴ On the other hand, to consider him only as a critic of modernity may not bring out the richness of his response. This is evident by the fact that there are conflicting interpretations of his stance towards modernity. Some people construe Gandhi as a social-conservative,¹⁵ while others like Ashish Nandi call him a critical traditionalist.¹⁶ Some go to the other extreme of calling him a modernist who made modernity acceptable by putting it in the garb of tradition.¹⁷ According to this view, Gandhi gave a new meaning to the very idea of tradition while juxtaposing it with modernity.¹⁸

Gandhiji's dislike towards modern civilization extended to all its aspects. Modern technology, machine, western social institutions, particularly those pertaining to law and medicine, were criticised the most by Gandhi. Most of all, what he disliked about modernity was its violence. According to Satish Jain,

On the one hand Gandhiji's commitment to non-violence was of a very high order and on the other he saw embodiment of violence in every feature of modernity. If in the value-system of a person non-violence figures very high and his characterization of a particular social order or civilization is such that violence figures in it in a prominent way then the

evaluative judgment of that social order or civilization being unacceptable follows immediately; without any recourse to analysis within a complex framework.¹⁹

For Gandhi modern civilization is based on inconsistent views²⁰ and it suffers from several limitations. For Gandhi, the normative structure of the society is an imperative. He believes values interwoven in every feature of the social order, whether it was technology, institutions or the consumption pattern. He was critical of everything which he thought might be unfavourable to the value-system which he believed in. In all probability his opposition to modern technology springs from his intuitive feeling that the value system he believed in was not compatible with modern technology. He disapproves most Western institutions because he feels they are inconsistent with his value system. For him, modernity is based on hedonistic values and a social order based on hedonistic values cannot sustain itself.²¹

Modernity lacks moral and spiritual depth²². It creates violence and reduces wisdom to rationality. The core of Gandhian philosophy revolves around spirituality. As a critic of modernity, Gandhi presents traditional, spiritual and cultural values as a solution. He says, 'the tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being [whereas] that of the western civilization is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless; the former is based on a belief in God'²³. For Gandhi, traditional and moral values are the essential part of any civilization. But for modernists the centre of study is individual. Although, Gandhi too accepts individual, God is the core of his philosophy. He too was influenced by the notion that the universe is governed by a mysterious power and men are only a part of it. Gandhi says, 'Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, political, social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service to all. And this cannot be done except through one's country. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of the humanity.'²⁴

He also says: 'The more I observe, the greater is the dissatisfaction with the modern life. I see nothing good in it. Men are good. But they are poor victims making themselves miserable under the false belief that they are doing good. I am aware that there is fallacy underneath this. I who claim to examine what is around me may be a deluded fool.'²⁵

For Gandhi, modern civilization is corrupting the moral and spiritual fabric of society. Western civilization is more inclined towards materialistic life with the help of science and technology. But Gandhi's philosophy always tries to define the development from ethical and moral perspectives. Gandhi wanted to build a society based on the fundamental values like love and humanity. Like Jesus Christ, he used to say "kill sin, not the sinner".

By propounding his philosophy on essentially good human nature, Gandhi intended to reject the modern concept of individual-centric state. For him, the ultimate objective of all political institutions is to flourish an individual's inherent qualities. When modern economic system is revolving around selfishness, profit-making etc., Gandhian philosophy argues about development of all or *Sarvodaya*.

Although Gandhi was a critic of modernity, he also borrows important principles from modernity. Two such concepts were those of "autonomy" and "freedom". But he saw the need to tame them by re-conceptualizing these notions. Gandhi challenges modern technology because he believes it diminishes "autonomy" and "freedom" and it destroys "self-governance". But he also challenges the Indian traditions, for example, untouchability, because he finds that it hinders autonomy. Gandhi says: "We have become pariahs of the Empire, because we have created "pariahs" in our midst"²⁶. Gandhi fights for the right of untouchables as citizens though he never advocates the removal of *Varnashrama* as a mode of social organization. Because his aim is not to abolish the concept of *Varnashrama*, which according to him is useful to awaken the Hindus about the limits of their traditions, their responsibilities toward their

fellow citizens and to prepare them for a '*swaraj*' or autonomous society.²⁷

Mahatma Gandhi says, there are two fallacious propositions in Western civilization: that might is right and the survival of the fittest. Those who have propounded these two maxims have given a meaning to them. They have said "might is right", that means, physical strength is right. Some of them have also combined intellectual strength with physical strength, but Gandhi would replace both these with heart-strength. Mere intellectual or physical strength can ever replace the heart-strength²⁸. It appears that Western civilization, therefore, is naturally disruptive, whereas Eastern civilization combines.²⁹

Mahatma Gandhi saw modern civilization as immoral. He says,

The tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being but that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless; the former is based on a belief in God. So understanding and so believing, it behoves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilization even as a child clings to the mother's breast.³⁰

He goes on to say,

This civilization is unquestionably the best, but it is to be observed that all civilizations have been on their trial. That civilization which is permanent outlives it. Because the sons of India were found wanting, its civilization has been placed in jeopardy. But its strength is to be seen in its ability to survive the shock. Moreover, the whole of India is not touched. Those alone who have been affected by Western civilization have become enslaved. We measure the universe by our own miserable foot-rule. When we are slaves, we think that the whole universe is enslaved. Because we are in an abject condition, we think that the whole of India is in that condition. As a matter of fact, it is not so, yet it is as well to impute our slavery to the whole of India. But if we bear in mind the above fact, we can see that if we become free, India is free.³¹

It is a known fact that in every social system there is multiplicity of values. It is highly unlikely that any significant value

would be completely absent from any social order. Different social orders cannot be meaningfully compared merely in terms of the presence or absence of a set of values. When different values are contradictory, individuals and societies need to resolve these conflicts in some way. One society might accord a particular value to a large domain of predominance while another society a relatively small one. The principle which determines the domain of every value is essentially the most important constitutive element of a civilization. For Gandhi, "Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty."³² It is clear from Gandhi's opinion that the modern civilization placed the idea of bodily comforts on too high a pedestal.³³

Gandhi was also a critic of the modern reliance on machinery. But the point of his criticism was that it affects the livelihood of people. Writing in *Harijan* on polished versus unpolished rice Gandhi says:

In my writing on cent per cent swadeshi, I have shown how some aspects of it can be tackled immediately with benefit to the starving millions both economically and hygienically. The richest in the land can share the benefit. Thus if rice can be pounded in the villages after the old fashion, the wages will fill the pockets of the rice-pounding sisters and the rice-eating millions will get some sustenance from the unpolished rice instead of pure starch which the polished rice provides. Human greed, which takes no count of the health or the wealth of the people who come under its heels, is responsible for the hideous rice-mills one sees in all the rice-producing tracts. If public opinion was strong, it would make rice-mills an impossibility by simply insisting on unpolished rice and appealing to the owners of rice-mills to stop a traffic that undermines the health of a whole nation and robs the poor people of an honest means of livelihood. But who will listen to the testimony of a mere layman on the question of food values? I, therefore, give below an extract from *The newer knowledge of Nutrition* by Mr. Collum and Simmonds which a medical friend, to whom I had appealed for help, has sent with his approbation.³⁴

Gandhi rejected capitalism because of his repugnance to a system where stress is given to profit maximization at the cost of human labour; machines are valued more than humans and where automation and mechanization is preferred to humanism. In criticizing modernity, Gandhi followed Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers. Gandhi's critique of modernity and the West largely originated from the writings of these Western scholars.

Gandhi says: "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilisation; it represents a great sin".³⁵ However, by 1919 his views on machinery do begin to change right up to 1947, as he gradually comes to concede some positive aspects like time and labour saving, even as he warns against the negative ones of concentrating wealth and displacing workers.³⁶ He was aware of how machinery can dehumanise and technology alienate, and he extends his critique to the professions of medicine and law.³⁷ The poor hardly benefit from these professional services, though they are often their victims. He criticizes these professions in *Hind Swaraj* with a suggestion for their nationalisation.³⁸

Gandhi wanted enrichment of all cultures amongst each other without losing their identity. He was outraged by what modernity had done to the world, in terms of unemployment, monotony and war. Further, its primary commitment to money through control of the market ensures that large numbers of people are kept in poverty. 'Money is their God'³⁹. The English in India 'hold whatever dominions they have for the sake of their commerce.... They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods.'⁴⁰

Modernity worries him because of its devastating effect on human beings. His 1925 speech says:

Do not for one moment consider that I condemn all that is Western. For the time being I am dealing with the predominant character of modern civilization, do not call it Western civilization, and the predominant character of modern civilization is the exploitation of the weaker races of the earth.⁴¹

Gandhi's *Khadi* Movement was actually an attempt to identify with the poor masses. In the words of *Siddhartha Shome*,

Gandhi's anti-modernity and his perceived glorification of poverty should be seen in the particular context of the Indian independence movement and in light of its particular needs. In today's very different context, invoking Gandhi to criticize modernity or to justify poverty does not make any sense whatsoever. In my view, had Gandhi lived today, he himself probably would not have been a "Gandhian" in the sense being anti-modern or pro-poverty.⁴²

We need to identify and preserve the precious elements of Indian culture. "This implies an inquiry into the structure and working of each of our major institutions such as family, school, the university, etc. and an insistent demand for their reform from the standpoint of modernization of India. Indian universities and colleges may become vital centres of a modern Indian culture. They can play an active role in the blending the old Indian traditions in the modern society for its benefit".⁴

Conclusion

For Gandhi, the normative structure of society is central to its sustainability. He was critical of everything which he thought diluting the value-system which he believed to be superior. In all probability his opposition to modern technology stemmed from this. His disappointment with Western institutions had its roots in his conviction that they are bound to lead to a system which is inconsistent with the value system he thinks appropriate. We shall conclude by quoting S K Jain, "Gandhi's critique of modernity is non-trivial as implicit in it is the idea of non-sustainability of a social order which places hedonistic values on the highest pedestal. In according centrality to the normative structure of the society, Gandhiji stands apart from his contemporaries who accorded centrality to science or science-based technology."⁴⁴

Notes:

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