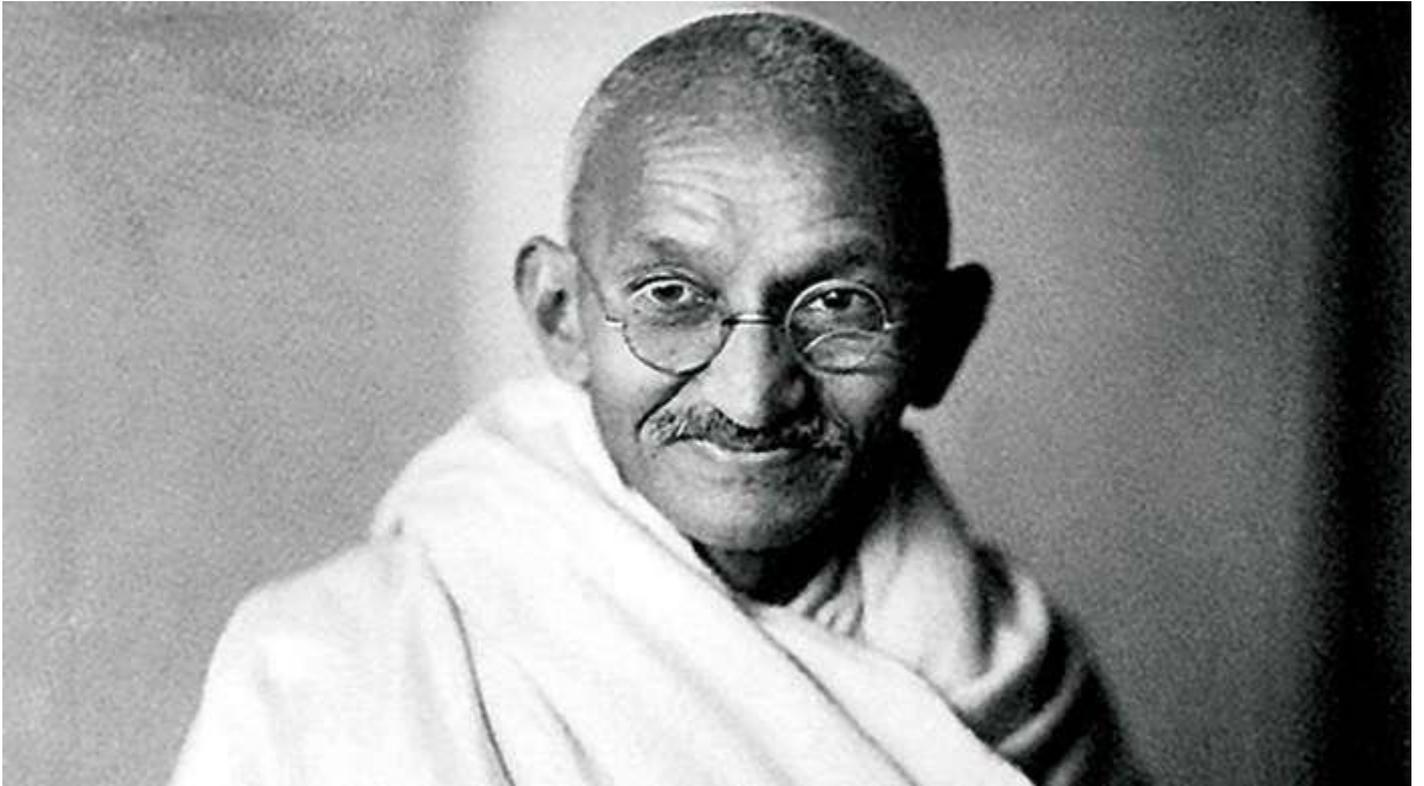


Hind Swaraj: A Thorough Critique of Western ‘Civilization’ and Modernity



Hind Swaraj is rightly regarded as one of the key foundational texts that was decisive in defining the course of the twentieth century. A political manifesto against colonialism and imperialism, a scathing yet constructive critique of the idea of civilizations, the text assumes immense significance as a critical reflection on the ‘modern’ times. It is often noted by various scholars that, when asked by a journalist about what he thought of the Western civilization, Gandhi replied, “I think it would be a good idea”[1]. Gandhi wanted to rescue the Western civilization from its modernity through a multi-layered critique of their conception of what constituted as ‘modernity’. Not only did he shed light on the evils of Western modernity and its disastrous consequences, but he also exposed the underlying inherent violence integral to its nature and existence. Through an inward understanding of the body, Gandhi offered a critique of materialist culture. By advocating for the reform of the self, he gave a unique theory of duties, where rights could not be seen as independent of them. Gandhi being a deeply religious person, initiated a counter-narrative to the discourses of secularism, and provided for a model of politics which was essentially ethical and religious[2]. He led frontal attacks on the “Satanic”[3] modern civilization in order to release both the colonized and the colonizers from the shackles of modernity. Also, it goes without saying that such an evaluation of the Western civilization and its modernity could not be complete without a simultaneous critique of the modern state.

Before attempting to unfold the layered arguments of Gandhi against Western modernity, it might be important to delve into the historical background of the formation of Gandhi's position as an 'anti-modernist'. Breckenridge traces its formation to a few months before the writing of *Hind Swaraj* (this is not to diminish the role of all the other factors that played a role, but only to highlight a significant yet rarely considered instance of Gandhi's early support for modern technology), when he realized the forceful ways of the modern state of identifying its citizens with the use of technology in order to shape their identities. It is observed that:

"Key, then, to understanding the bitter rejection of Western modernity in general, and colonial government in particular, in the *Hind Swaraj* was its author's earlier involvement in the design of the administrative procedures of progressive imperialism in the Transvaal. Contrary to the popular view of his role, before 1908 Gandhi saw himself as an expert administrator and an architect of more efficient and secure legal mechanisms for regulating the movement and identity of Indians in South Africa. He was an early advocate of administrative finger-printing for South African Indians... When he endorsed full-print registration in 1908, he was accepting Smut's argument that the state required a scientific basis for identification, and he used the same scientific virtues of ten-print registration to cajole the Indians in the Transvaal to register." [4]

However, once Gandhi observed the use of technology as a tool for policing used by the state, his views on the subject underwent a drastic transformation:

"The real change was in understanding of the nature and purpose of the state. Before 1908, he had seen the state as an instrument of harmony, shaped by science and law, and he had understood his own practice as an extension of that power. Afterward he viewed the "administrative machinery", with its technological means and telos, as an instrument of destruction. The timing and character of this capsized view of the state suggests that it was his entanglement with the building of the fingerprint register that prompted the change." [5]

In spite of Gandhi being often portrayed as a "committed enemy of modernism" [6], *Hind Swaraj* is read by some as a very modern text, and it is seen as "nothing if not a reflection, steeped in the spirit of political modernity, on the individual, his place in society, and the relationship of the State to civil society" [7]. While such an unconventional reading of the text opens up the possibility of interpreting it in a new light, however simultaneously it also seems as an attempt to tame Gandhi and fit *Hind Swaraj* into the existing genres of modern political texts of post-Enlightenment liberalism. The dialogic model preferred by Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* itself is very unconventional and breaks away from the 'modern' descriptive models of laying down one's political thought, and yet it is a very modern and recent phenomenon which adopts a journalistic dialogic model. These unique

ways of Gandhi show the futility of attempting to cage him within a given theoretical framework.

Now one may proceed to analyze and evaluate Gandhi's critique of Western modernity. His treatment of Western civilization in its contemporary form should serve as a suitable starting point for such an evaluation (It should be noted that he wasn't against modernity as such, but against a specific form of it embodied in Western modernity). In the sixth chapter of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi identifies the tests of civilization (mainly the Western notions of what constitutes a 'civilization'). Through the role of the editor he states that:

"Let us first consider what state of things is described by the word 'civilization'. Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life... Formerly, in Europe, people ploughed their lands mainly by manual labour. Now, one man can plough a vast tract by means of steam-engines, and can thus amass great wealth. This is called a sign of civilization. Formerly, the fewest men wrote books that were most valuable. Now, anybody writes and prints anything he likes and poisons people's mind. Formerly, men travelled in wagons; now they fly through the air in trains at the rate of four hundred and more miles per day. This is considered the height of civilization... Everything will be done by machinery. Formerly, when people wanted to fight with one another, they measured between them their bodily strength; now it is possible to take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun from a hill. This is civilization... There are now diseases of which people never dreamt before, and an army of doctors is engaged in finding out their cures, and so hospitals have increased. This is a test of civilization... This civilization takes notes neither of morality nor of religion. Its votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion... Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so. This civilization is irreligion, and it has taken such a hold on the people of Europe that those who are in it appear to be half mad... This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed. According to the teaching of Mahomed this would be considered a Satanic civilization. Hinduism calls it the Black Age... Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it." [8]

One of the primary attacks mounted on the Western civilization are its promotion of a culture of consumption and self-indulgence. Gandhi's critique of modern medicine and doctors is actually a clarion call against such a culture being promoted by them. In this sense, *Hind Swaraj* "is written as an intensely naturopathic document" [9]. This is precisely why, as a response to such an indulgent civilizational ethos, Gandhi calls for self-restraint, self-control and a reform of the self as a starting point for redemption of the society from the evils

of modernity. Moving on, in the thirteenth chapter of the text, Gandhi elaborates upon what he considers to be a “true civilization”. It is defined by Gandhi thus:

“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’.”[10] Such a good conduct is intimately connected, according to Gandhi, to self-restraint (Here, Gandhi displays his grasp on the understanding of human psychology):

“We notice that mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw happiness was largely a mental condition.”[11]

Gandhi arrives at the true test of civilization that should be rightly regarded as the civilizational ethos through his conception of the Indian civilization, explicitly concluding the Indian civilization to be a civilization in the real sense of the word and also regarding it for similar reasons as being the highest civilizational culture that the mankind has been witness to. He draws a sharp contrast between the Indian and Western civilization as follows:

“The tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, 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 its mother’s breast.”[12]

Hind Swaraj is a seminal text in deconstructing the inherent violence of Western modernity. It exposes the dangers that lie unseen in the fetishization of speed, machinery, and excessive indulgence of the body. Not only that, it also offers as solutions counter-narratives and alternatives in the form of patience, mechanical labour, and self-restraint. In fact, the plea for patience lies scattered throughout the text, whenever the editor calms the reader not to arrive at hasty conclusions but rather to let the editor’s message seep in slowly yet surely into the mind of the reader with its full import. One such instance is when the editor says that, “I do not expect my views to be accepted all of a sudden. My duty is to place them before readers like yourself. Time can be trusted to do the rest.”[13] Gandhi wanted to deploy “the asceticism of patience and self-knowledge”[14] in order to recover the “loss of control over the mind and the body”[15] due to the effects of the modern civilization. Another contrasting aspect of Gandhi’s temporality of action is his treatment of the domain of history. He perceives history to be a chronological

statement of wars and violence and thus finds it to be insufficient to provide for instances as examples of love and non-violence at play in the political arena. He finds history insufficient for providing instances of support for his idea of soul-force and passive resistance. In this sense, ironically Gandhi, who eventually goes down as the greatest man of the 20th century in the history of mankind, is essentially anti-history and prefers to rather be a part of folklores and weave myths instead of searching for a beam of hope for non-violence in the violent recorded history of humankind. When questioned about any historical evidence for the success of soul-force by the reader, the editor in Hind Swaraj responds as follows:

“The fact that there are so many men still alive in the world shows that it is based not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love. Therefore, the greatest and most unimpeachable evidence of the success of this force is to be found in the fact that, in spite of the wars of the world, it still lives on.

Thousands, indeed tens of thousands, depend for their existence on a very active working of this force... History does not, and cannot, take note of this fact. History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul... History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history.”[16]

For Gandhi, violence of the modern civilization does not manifest itself simply in the production and use of arms, and perpetuation of systemic violence by the modern state through its discourses of power, but the ways of modernity (such as the fetishization of history, treatment of speed as a marker of progress and extreme emphasis on bodily welfare) themselves serve as sites for violence. Gandhi almost immediately relates such fetishization of speed to the binaries of good and evil, identifying the emphasis on speed with evil as according to him, “Good travels at a snail’s pace... Those who want to do good are not selfish, they are not in a hurry, they know that to impregnate people with good requires a long time. But evil has wings. To build a house takes time. Its destruction takes none.”[17] Gandhi offers patience as the implicit solution to the problematic of modernity while stating, “It is necessary to exercise patience. The true inwardness of the evils of civilization you will understand with difficulty.”[18] His critique of modern machinery also points out its violence and then proposes to replace it with a Swadeshi alternative, the charkha being the symbol of such an indigenous alternative.[19] The alienation that modern machinery (Gandhi referred to modern machinery as “a great sin”[20]) produced, and the suddenness of eventuality that it led to, was something which Gandhi viewed as unbearable for a civilized society, as it would lead to a depredation of humanity within the society. Bhikhu Parekh argues that, “In Gandhi’s view violence ‘oozed from every pore’ of modern society, and had so much become a way of life that human beings today were in danger of

losing the capacity to notice its pervasive presence, let alone find ways of dealing with it. Although it claimed to be based on such values as human dignity, equality, freedom, and civility, modern civilization was inherently militarist and violent.”[21]

Hind Swaraj also provides a radical critique of the modern (liberal) regime of rights. Gandhi’s theory of passive resistance is developed in such a backdrop where rights are not seen as divorced from duties. Faizal Devji rightly notes that “Gandhi’s politics of non-violence was as far removed as it could possibly be from humanitarianism and its cult of victims... His response to suffering was not in the first instance to ameliorate it but instead to make sure that those who had been wronged behaved like moral agents and not victims, thus allowing them to enter into a political relationship with their persecutors.”[22] Gandhi, in a letter to Julian Huxley (written in response to UNESCO approaching him in 1947 to express his opinion on a report of the UNHR), condemned the discourse of universal human rights in the following words[23]:

“I learnt from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved came from duty well done. Thus the very right to live accrues to us only when we do the duty of citizenship of the world. From this one fundamental statement, perhaps it is easy enough to define the duties of man and woman and correlate every right to some corresponding duty to be first performed. Every other right can be shown to be usurpation hardly worth fighting for. I wonder if it is too late to revise the idea of defining the rights of man apart from his duty.”[24]

A deeper meaning lies hidden within this intricate connection of rights and duties, which is an ethics of self-sacrifice and responsibility. A heightened sense of such all-consuming self-sacrifice is witnessed in the editor’s statements demanding an embracing of death:

“That nation is great which rests its head upon death as its pillow. Those who defy death are free from all fear. For those who are laboring under the delusive charms of brute force, this picture is not over-drawn. The fact is that, in India, the nation at large has generally used passive resistance in all departments of life. We cease to co-operate with our rulers when they displease us. This is passive resistance.”[25]

Hind Swaraj also critiques majoritarianism, masculine nationalism and political violence, all born as an outcome of the modern nation state. It has been argued by many scholars that the reader in Hind Swaraj actually represents V.D. Savarkar, and some even contemplate that the reader could be Bal Gangadhar Tilak himself, the foremost leader of the Indian national movement before the advent of Gandhi in the Indian political arena. Notwithstanding who the reader actually resembles, the crucial message of the text against spurious nationalism is that the way it has

been constructed is itself a handmaiden of Western modernity and hence it would not do any good to the Indian civil society to adopt such a hyper masculine model. Also significant is the emphasis on the justiciability of the means, and that the non-violent character of the means adopted to attain freedom and independence should be treated as an end in itself.[26] An oft-quoted statement from Hind Swaraj summarizes Gandhi's views on the modern school of nationalism (which supported the use of political violence to attain independence, and wanted to borrow the modern state and its military and machinery which it perceived to be good for the society):

"You have well drawn the picture. In effect it means this: 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 and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englستان. This is not the Swaraj that I want." [27]

However, considering such an all-encompassing critique of Western modernity and its various manifestations, a case can be made that probably the greatest contribution of this critique was the advocacy for the reform of the self. Be it how he defines civilization as good conduct which steps from the self and the individual, or his arguments for reinforcing the Indian civilizational ethos of self-restraint, self-sacrifice, taking up responsibilities, performance of duties or the embracing of death, all point towards a radical transformation of the self. Shruti Kapila has argued that, "*Hind Swaraj* subordinated history to the creation of a new self... A new and unique moral and political language of the self was signified for Gandhi through radical technologies of the self from spinning to celibacy. Gandhi shared in the nationalist idea that spirituality or what he often called "soul force" was a this-worldly force that was transformative of the self and the world." [28] For Gandhi, it is essentially "the failure to cultivate the ethical and spiritual self that is responsible for many horrors of modern civilization" [29].

Hind Swaraj is a both a critical reflection on the idea of civilizations and a civilizational document in itself, which needs to be re-read by every generation in order to get a grasp on the essential nature and indispensability of Indian civilization. Gandhian critiques of Western modernity have been considered and dealt with at length by numerous scholars and there's a whole oeuvre of literature on the subject to be explored. However, if the Indian civilization wants to gain from Gandhi's legacy, it shouldn't restrict itself to simply elaborating upon Gandhi's critiques but should take a step further to march on a quest for Gandhian alternatives to the ways of Western modernity (which has now been deeply internalized by the Indian nation state and the civil society). What one needs today is a search for Gandhi the futurist, Gandhi as a scientist, Gandhi as a text striking dialogues and creative inventions across societies. The search for a "Gandhian epistemology of science" [30] should be a good starting point.

Footnotes:

- [1] V. Lal, 'Gandhi's West, the West's Gandhi', *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, p. 281; E.F. Schumacher, *Good Work*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1979
- [2] See A. Nandy, 'An Anti-secularist Manifesto', *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1995, p. 35-64
- [3] A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 33
- [4] K. Breckenridge, 'Gandhi's Progressive Disillusionment: Thumbs, Fingers, and the Rejection of Scientific Modernism in *Hind Swaraj*', *Public Culture*, vol. 23, issue 2, 2011, p. 334
- [5] *Ibid*, at 348
- [6] S. Muralidharan, 'Religion, Nationalism and the State: Gandhi's and India's Engagement with Political Modernity', *Social Scientist*, vol. 34, no. 3/4, 2006, p. 8
- [7] *Id.*
- [8] A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 35-38
- [9] S. Visvanathan, *A Carnival for Science*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 233
- [10] A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 67. Emphasis added
- [11] *Ibid*, at 68
- [12] *Ibid*, at 71
- [13] *Ibid*, at 72
- [14] U.S. Mehta, 'Patience, Inwardness, and Self-Knowledge in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*', *Public Culture*, vol. 23, issue 2, 2011, p. 429
- [15] *Ibid*, at 423
- [16] A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 89-90
- [17] *Ibid*, at 47-48
- [18] *Ibid*, at 47
- [19] S. Sahasrabudhey, *Gandhi's Challenge to Modern Science*, Goa, Other India Press, 2002, p. 64
- [20] See A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 107. Gandhi as the editor observes, "Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization. It represents a great sin."
- [21] B. Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 83
- [22] F. Devji, 'The Paradox of Nonviolence', *Public Culture*, vol. 23, issue 2, 2011, p. 272
- [23] *Ibid*, at 273

[24] M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 95, p. 142

[25] A. J. Parel (ed.), *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 94-95

[26] *Ibid*, at 81

[27] *Ibid*, at 28

[28] S. Kapila, 'Gandhi Before Mahatma: The Foundations of Political Truth', *Public Culture*, vol. 23, issue 2, 2011, p. 447

[29] B.S. Chimni, 'The Self, Modern Civilization, and International Law: Learning from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule', *The European Journal of International Law*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2012, p. 1164

[30] S. Visvanathan, *A Carnival for Science*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 230

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