



## **Revisiting Swaraj, Spirituality, and Sustainable Development: Gandhi's Critique of Modernity**

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### **Abstract**

The passage explores Mahatma Gandhi's critique of Western modernity, emphasizing his advocacy for self-sufficient village economies and skill development as alternatives. It explores Gandhi's alternative vision of Swaraj, advocating for self-sufficient village economies and skill development. It highlights Gandhi's spiritual and moral critique of industrialization, emphasizing the relevance of his ideas in addressing contemporary global challenges, including violence, poverty, and ecological damage. The passage encourages a reconsideration of dominant development paradigms and positions Gandhi as a key figure in shaping postcolonial discourse on civilization, culture, and sustainable progress.

### **Keywords**

Gandhi, Modernity, HindSwaraj, Swaraj, Eastern civilization, Self-sufficient villages, Skilldevelopment, Spiritualcritique, Moral well-being, Postcolonialdiscourse, Sustainabledevelopment, Globalchallenges, Alternativeparadigms,

### **Top of Form**

Gandhi, modernity in its plural, subjects of modernity; direct, indirect both as modernity and its location has a bearing on temporal and spatial taken together. Is modernity witnessing its end or we can't simply breathe it anymore? Why does Gandhi who has almost been treated in his bystander mode, becomes acutely relevant at intervals, to infuse life into deadening environ of modern subject of a modern nation-state? Why Gandhi and why not Gandhi is something very important to discuss before we go on with our lived difficulties with modern and continuity of the realm. It is also important to look at the element of rupture with modern where Gandhi becomes an important juncture to bring out the latent forces of tradition, civilization and spiritualism to the rescue of the colonized. Gandhi could realize very early that colony as the defender and propagator of modernity needed a systematic critique, nothing less could delegitimize colony in its civilizing mission and break down its messianic self-portrayal. To use Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's stylistic metaphor, India had started 'talking back'. To quote him 'The two broad tendencies in this trend (civilizational discourse) were, first, to talk back to the colonial masters in refutation of the disparagement of the ancient Indian by colonial historians, and, second, to assert India's civilizational unity in the past.' (Bhattacharya, Talking Back, OUP, 2011, pg 2). Emboldened by this 'talking back' on every issue concerning India's noteworthy past Gandhi made fundamental shift in the thinking of intellectuals in awe of colonial excellence

at everything English and started hinting at in-built systemic violence in the British missionary attempts. H pointed to the violence of uprooting the Indian education system too. To quote him: "India's Indigenous education system was like a beautiful tree, which was uprooted ruthlessly by the British". In *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Viswanathan uses Gramscian model of cultural hegemony (In his *Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci argues that a class can exercise its power not merely by the use of military force but by an institutionalized system of moral and intellectual leadership that propagates certain ideas and beliefs) to analyze the relationship between British political and commercial interests and the establishment of English Literature as a discipline in India. (Viswanathan, 1989). Edward Said while hitting at the core of Imperialism and its tendencies does provoke the sentiments of the Orient, he is not less valid. To quote him: Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, and that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others. (Said, 1994: 5). Indeed the colony and its modernity project was nothing but the exploiter of the humanity, does find a voice in Gandhi. Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909) came out with an unprecedented reasoning which had less political and more civilizational critique of the West and though it saw some revision in terms of his political acts later, in general it is being acknowledged that Gandhian unique model of resistance where he could accommodate the British but certainly not their civilizational project, this novelty of Gandhian method and deeper understanding of the Eastern worldview is what makes Gandhi a front critique of the western modernity.

#### Modernity and lived modernity

Why Gandhi? Why not Gandhi? As it became excruciating to look for differences in these two positions, I chose to summarize it in the same frame. The answer lies in Gandhi being a methodical rupture for the entire project of modernity. And it's immense to just notice the enormity of his method of offering political, socio-economic solutions which could virtually break the back bone of modernity in a systematic manner for posterity. Let's talk of vital points of modernity which made it a phenomenon for almost five century for now, thankfully Gandhi had to bear with it a half century less. What constitutes modernity? Is it an antidote to everything medieval? Saurabh Dube has postulated this probability whereas Anthony Giddens and Habermas see modernity as a self-generated, European phenomenon (Saurabh Dube, 2009, 34) or a false consciousness! Is its linear narrative of rationality, universalism, scientific enchantments, industrial specter, individualism, separation of public sphere from private spaces, "secularized religion and disenchanting knowledge" system merely a subterfuge to its disenchantments with humanity and nature? Otherwise what explanations we can offer for such deliberations on modernity when Philip K. Lawrence (*Modernity and War: The Creed of Absolute Violence*, pg. 87) writes that the leitmotiv of modernity has been Western civilization's "dominion over other peoples and lands, the place of science in the construction and ordering of

the polity, and the rise of technocratic and instrumentalist rationalism"! How did modernity dealt with indigenous cultures and community not falling in line with its 'progressive' outlook? Amidst the cobwebs of money, market, consumption, nation and empire," hierarchical oppositions between myth and history, emotion and reason, ritual and rationality, east and west" (Dube, 2009, pg 2) what possibilities Gandhi offer to the subjects of colony with the memory of lived modernity not something totally alien to the system merely as an idea and ideology to vow for or reject.

### Eastern dilemma and Gandhi

Today, when the colonial subjects are trying to gather their life and its notion as eastern subjects, it's imperative to think of the four stages of life as located in civilizational memory not in fragmented subjectivity of the modernity. A man (here in sense of gender) is visioned living through Brahmacharya, Grihstha, Vanprastha and subsequent Sanyas while his/her Purusharth lies in becoming worthy of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Modernity with its abrupt disruption has taken away not only the imagination of this man but left him laggard with indulgence of Artha and Kaam disproportionately. Alasdair McIntyre, (After Virtue, 1981) in a strong critique of modernity, does point towards the segmentation of life, divided into several parts each disconnected to from the other and without a fuller sense of life. "Modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public life, and the corporate from the persona. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms in which we are taught to think and to feel"(MacIntyre, 1981, 190) Vidyapati , a fourteenth century poet and statesman posits the idea of man fulfilling his life through various stages, through secular persuasions but not irreligious, the man must have a spiritual realm where religion is his private affair.(Hetukar Jha, Man in Indian Tradition, 2002). Gandhi had a similar scheme of life living through these stages (ashram) and had an outer manifestation in living Ashram (here a hermit's abode), Ajay Skaria talks of this factor in his work (Dube, 2009 ed) as 'everydayness of Gandhian religious politics'. This is echoed in Thomas Weber (2006) "without understanding Gandhi's spiritual quest, we do not understand Gandhi". It was his hallmark insight which allowed the basic antagonism in perspectives of east and west towards life and life forces, to come to the surface. Without understanding this cultural gap, the fuller understanding of opposition to colony and empire will not be holistic. Ashish Nandy does point towards this essential dilemma existing due to this cultural gap quite aptly in the following paragraph:"to Gandhi the demonic Gandhi considered the cultural gap between the modern and the non-modern cultures deeper than that between the West and the East. It is the modern culture he rejected, not only as a social ideal, but also as a framework within which one could struggle for an equitable distribution of the products of modernity. Thus, to him, the demonic aspects of the modern Western culture did not centre on only the political economy of modernity, but also around modern West's scientific secularism, technologism, over organization, ideologies of

adulthood and masculinity, gigantism, stress on normality and over socialization, and cultural evolutionism. Such a critique allowed Gandhi to see the West as a differentiated structure and the Western man as a co-victim of the oppression of the modern nation-state system, centralized economy, mass media and technocracy, and an ethic which was openly ethnocidal. Traditional cultures also were not undifferentiated to him. He was a critical traditionalist, not an uncritical defender of faiths, and he believed in 'negative' relativism, not in the anthropologist's version of cultural relativism. No culture could be perfect in his model, not even a traditional one; it could only be useful as a shifting baseline for cultural criticism (Nandy, *From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the West* in Ramashray Roy (ed), *Contemporary Crisis and Gandhi*, pp 89). To continue with the search of the reasons for vacuum in the cultural realm of the colonized, Bhattacharya argues, "In fact the search for a sacred India, an unchanging foundational basis of the civilization, was not limited to the communally minded (he refers to Savarkar, RK Mukherjee and Vincent Smith in this regard). The exit from the sacred timelessness created a vacuum. A sacred eternal India was needed to fill that vacuum. This psychological need was met by the discourse of civilization." Now where did lie the sacred of Gandhi that's something very significant to understand. Irrespective of heavy use of religious idioms for his public communications his sacred lied somewhere in the cultural realm of which the people with their heart and soul became the custodians. Gandhi, undoubtedly had a unique recipe to counter the soullessness of the empire. Gandhi it seems was talking of everyday way of life or living culture, people's culture which was sufficiently distanced from the mechanized primacy and technological supremacy of the western industrial outlook. Here in an interview to a Chinese missionary, Gandhi said "A nation's culture resides in the heart and soul of its people" (*Collected Works of M Gandhi*, Pub Div, 1999, vol 10, pg 7). The 'godless' modern civilization was essentially immoral to Gandhi and this immorality however meagre it may sound, was at the root of divorcing economic activities from the moral concerns of the industrializing mission which was clinching away the superiority of the soulful people by the immoral, unethical greed of the Imperial. Not to miss the close linkages among various exploitative agencies such as legal, political and economic machinery of the empire, Gandhi condemned the structural manipulative forms of sustained exploitation and greed of the empire. Gandhi was so incisive in his criticism of the western structures that he was keen on evolving Indian alternatives to Western liberal political structures otherwise he did not see virtue in mere home rule, he was advocating for a bigger version, self-rule. It's distinctly clear that swaraj was in true sense an emancipation for each individual as he asserted "swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself". Gandhian absolute faith in the individual human capacity was unshakable and to some critiques it was utopian, a dream. Gandhi responded to such dissenters "To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man" (Gandhi, CUP, 1997, ed Parel) Gandhi was following the similar notions around dignity of man, what had struck Vidyapati as the most existential question of society and man. It has been explored by Hetukar Jha in his *Man in Indian Tradition* (Aryan, 2002, p 20), he writes "InKirtilata, Vidyapati raised this question and then presented his thoughtful proposition jivanmaanson (living with dignity). Thus, according to him, the most necessary or essential condition of living as a human being in society is living with self-respect and dignity." Jha consolidates his finding of Vidyapati's

rationale in Martin Buber and Hegel who “considered the desire to be recognized as a human being with dignity as a driving force in history” Hegel too contrasted the material well-being of man with his dignified self and held that dignity was of superior value. Gandhi confirms this notion of man closer to his concept of satyagrahi, thus the notion of man in Indian tradition was closely understood by Gandhi which was an alternative to the greed and lust of the empirical oppressor. Gandhi closely links this moral superior being of his satyagrahi in his non-violent avatar. Hence non-violence remained the cardinal principal and non-negotiable under all circumstances. However a few historians such as Partha Chatterjee explains Gandhian methods in terms of “real politics with immense maneuverability” yet Gandhian contestation of the empire purely in moral terms was a clever and unique strategy which can be a benchmark for the posterity, for all types of mass movement without suffering causality of a grave order.

Does modernity have a spiritual to its claim?

Modernity and its ramifications are too outreaching for the world to reflect upon the theme in entirety. It's time to revisit the monolithic and linear presentation of modernity as progressive and positive construct, looking at the paradoxes of the times, we are currently living in, as these complexities are nothing but the by-product of the singularity with which we pursued modernity. However, from critiques aspect modernity and its fault lines on gender, religion, exclusivist racism, hyper-nationalism, imperialism, and the ecological damage caused by the massive industrialization are crucial to examine. Now, with this new task assigned, whom do we look at to have provided an incisive critique of the malaise? If we believe Ashish Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, and Bhikhu Parekh then none other than Gandhi had developed a trenchant critique of the modernity. Before Gandhi, it was Tagore who had identified the fissures of the civility which modernity had offered. Gandhi was too critical of the West's disproportionate power and spread and thereby Gandhi emerged as a threat to the entire edifice of legitimacy of the West. Gandhi could visualize the different world orders which was being developed to validate the hierarchical model to continue and he was highly suspicious of the liberalism and civil society which it professed in the process. When Gandhi presses for village based self-sufficient economy of the ancient times, probably he could see the realities of globalization on the third world countries. Gandhi though intrinsically pluralist and secular to the core did engage in religious idioms and envisaged a politics with conscience what was popularly believed to be his fascination for Ram-Rajya but it was nothing but an imagination of a just order. How much of Gandhi did we really engage with while making of this nation, is really a theme to ponder when modernity and its dangers are looming large in our front.

Since Gandhi had already set his tone against the package of modernity offered to India in the form of nation-state, parliamentary democracy, growing public sphere, modern formal education system and a sensibility to reflect upon crucial issues from western perspective, was what Gandhi seemed to bother and see dangers of these processes in the long run. But it would be fallacy to consider Gandhi as an ardent critique of modernity without appreciating its limited virtues or making use of it in limited context, now how ‘limited’ would be that limited was an issue.

Before we deliberate upon the type or types of modernity to understand Gandhiana and its salvation prescribed for the subjects of modernity, it's imperative to ask why Gandhi emerges as a valid checkpoint, countering modernity for the once colonized subjects or is it a universalist in Gandhi which we are exploring to bring forth the fallacies of modernity and its robust growth of almost five centuries by now. What is the context of moral failure Dunning 2001(Kung, 2003) is looking for when he is decoding the capitalist collapse of seven country? Does Gandhi makes a sense here when he says "I don't make distinction between ethics and economics"? Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore, is sinful" does it ring a bell when Gandhi emphasizes upon the alienating character of the mass production, irrespective of its ownership, his emphasis on VasudhaivaKutumbakam and Sarvodaya were not without adequate formulations. Gandhian economic, political and social prescription for a free India was not the nation state rather it was self-sufficient village units of production for masses, not mass production. (Sanjay Kumar 2006). This village self-sufficiency as the basic moral-economic unit was an excellent response to the moral-deficit, reprehensible civil society imagination of the west, how Partha Chatterjee looks at it but how pragmatic could be this model for sustainable development the latest buzzword (in the aftermath of realization of the havoc unleashed by the development rhetoric) needs a deeper analysis. However, the alternative which Gandhi was keen to promote as a rescue model to the what later came to be appalled as 'developing world' had its fair share of critique in MN Srinivas and AM Shah who branded it just another attempt at isolation. To quote them: "The idea of the isolation and self-sufficiency of the Indian village was first propounded by Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1830, and 'since then it has had distinguished supporters, scholars as well as politicians. Sir Henry Maine and Karl Marx supported the idea, and in recent times, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers not only stated that Indian village was traditionally self-sufficient but also wanted a political programme which would restore to these villages their pristine self-sufficiency."

But they preferred to call it just another illusion is not surprising as the dominant scaling in case of rural vs. urban has always been tilted towards a city specific structure and that was hardly a case to wonder. To quote: "But it is only an illusion and the reality is quite different." (The Economic Weekly, The Myth of Self-sufficiency of the Indian Villages, 1960). But it seems the "small is beautiful" as an idea plagued an economist from the first world and he writes extensively on unsustainability of the current exploitation of nature as natural resources should be treated as capital which will certainly exhaust. (Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered, E F Schumacher, 1973). To quote: "the aim ought to be to obtain the maximum amount of well-being with the minimum amount of consumption". In the epilogue he emphasizes the need for the "philosophy of materialism" to take second place to ideals such as justice, harmony, beauty, and health. Does it find a resonance in Gandhian model of greedless, moral economy?

Another moot point in Gandhian enchantment with village economy was the parallel narrative of his skill development which would entail the smaller, self-sufficient units of skilled, employable generation who could be independent with the aid of vocational education since early. Here

again it goes in tradition of Vidyapati who desired his audience to be young to be initiated into moral education while writing Purush Pariksha. As Hetukar Jha explains” its value for moral instruction of ‘boys of immature understanding’ was first and foremost in his mind”. His idea on education was something beyond literacy. To quote him “By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education not even the beginning. It is one of the means whereby man and women can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education.”(Harijan, 31/7/1937)His idea of basic education or Buniyaadi Taalim as it was named was based on the idea of skill orientation of the child since early childhood but unfortunately we could only generate the factory systems suitable for job hunting and depressive, dependent youth committing suicides as early as ten years or so. Can we acknowledge the immense destruction of current young dying frequently in Kota like factories and elsewhere? I’m sure we are not yet ready to admit the abject failure of what we adopted as a policy matter resulting into massive unemployment, farmer suicides, large migrations, and an ever illusive dream of becoming ‘developed’. While Nehru was keen on seeking changed stances of Gandhi on modernity in 1945 since 1909, “Gandhi stood his ground and stated with reference to Hind Swaraj: My experience has confirmed the truth of what I wrote in 1909. If I am the only one left who believed in it, I would not be sorry” (Bhattacharya, 2011, 61). This firmness could never be understood by the policy makers as they failed to read the chasm between Gandhian prescriptions and how they blindly chose to ignore Gandhian unique theories towards sustainable development and here we are left with the job of cleaning and polluting the river systems at one go. The two big issues concerning the world today are: violence and its institutionalizations and poverty and the widening gap. Now unfortunately while we talk of terrorism and its repercussions for one section of the world, the rest half is only seen as the perpetuator, hence go be eradicated. Now no more it's the civilizational clash we are concentrating upon, the terrorists are, our own neighbors, so now it has zeroed down upon human vs human paradoxically, that too when humanism and humanity are getting pedagogically enshrined. The efforts and talks are for countering the terrorists and terrorism not addressing its solutions. Gandhi and his critique of modernity is a valid tool here when he spoke of spiritual side of human to be of supreme importance, otherwise the Frankenstein monster form modern Prometheus has become a reality of industrialization. “Modern machinery can only create the desire for more goods, it can never satisfy it. Worse, industrialism brings destruction, exploitation and disease to a society, and creates an especially exploitative relationship between the city and the village” (Gandhi 1938, 66-70). The miserable, inhuman crime graphs of the urban spaces, shrinking opportunities in the tertiary sector, with a failed socially violent green revolution and with agriculture firmly in the grip of multinationals leading to large-scale farmer suicides are definitely not a sign which could be cited as the progress of modernity where machine-man, rural-urban, young-old, agriculture-industry, reason-faith, spiritual-mundane, history-myth, and rich and poor can co-exist at peace with each other. To quote Nandy “The undying myth of development that it will remove all poverty forever from all corners of the world, now lies shattered. It is surprising that so many people believed it for so many years with such admirable innocence.” Further he adds “One has to spend enormous psychological resources to ensure that they do not interfere with our ‘normal’ life by burdening us with a crippling sense of guilt” (Dube ed, 2009, 485). Isn’t it then that we

are living in the everyday mental asylum of this world where co-existence being a remote possibility can only arouse cannibalism of Nirbhaya order or even worse! If this is a just order of a rational, scientific temperament where empiricism can do a miracle of ‘No One Killed Jessica’ or Arushi double murder case where with maximum expertise of this progressive, dynamic specialized technology could not ascertain the guilty, it’s better to live in the presumption of isolation and spiritualism.

It becomes imperative to ask if Gandhian spiritualism could be understood by his use religious idioms, re-reading of Gita and also writing Hind Swaraj in the same format of question-answer. To quote Bhattacharya “Gandhi chose this form in Hind Swaraj because of the influence of the Gita on his mind. There was perhaps also a greater purpose: he wanted to represent in this form the dialogue between the West and East, which is the theme of the book”. The answer is complex and as Gandhian brilliance lies in a methodic portrayal of civilizational superiority and essential differences in human progress imagination of these binary oppositions, Gandhian insistence on essentialism of eastern spiritualism serves a great purpose in chartering an alternative free from conflict, violence, greed, and state eventually. His imagination of a human was not of dependent medicant rather an ascetic who could enunciate. That asceticism lies in the core of living everyday peaceful co-existence in everyday life. Hence Gandhi and his mature criticism towards western modernity was not merely a moment, it was an everyday Gandhi with evolving experience of almost 36 years (1909-1945) who wanted to stand his ground with firm conviction, it’s just that we never allowed that to happen after all we were doomed not to breathe easy.

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