

Contextualizing Gandhi's Critique of Modernity

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Abstract – This paper argues that the notion of modernity has been confined to techno-industrial progress, rationality, individualism and to a narrow definition of the spirit of freedom but very meagre space has been given to the other notions and sensibilities in the discourse of modernity. It is because modernity has been hegemonized by the west wherein their values are projected as 'modern' or 'rational' and the values of the rest of the world are projected as 'non-modern' or 'anti-modern'. This has created the perception of the world civilizations in terms of binary opposites of 'self' and 'other'. The non-western man is the 'other', 'superstitious' and 'irrational' whereas a western individual belonging to a scientific civilization is, by the very application of this binary, as 'rational', 'modern' and 'enlightened'. This division of the world into binaries because of the perceived modernity of the western civilization is at the heart of the Gandhi's critique of modernity. It is this 'arrogance of modernity' or 'hyper-modernity' of the west that Gandhi has vehemently opposed. There are two different ways how scholars and analysts visualize Gandhi's stance on modernity. On the one hand, some scholars construe Gandhi as an ultra-conservative while others go on to the other extreme of calling him a modernist who made modernity acceptable to the masses by putting it in the garb of tradition while others have labeled him as 'postmodern' because he challenged both the old and the new established orders. He challenged both the 'ritual order of upper caste Hinduism' and at the same time rejected the 'high modernist order of the Nehruvian Congress'. Nevertheless, Gandhi gave new meaning to the very idea of tradition by juxtaposing it with modernity that was both original and path-breaking, thus, widened the notion and meaning of modernity beyond its narrower interpretation in the west.

Key Words- Rationality, Modernity, Hypermodernity, Tradition

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BROADER COUNTERS OF MODERNITY

Modernity emerged in the West from about the fifteenth century but it was sheer European enlightenment in the eighteenth century that gave a profound and specific meaning to modernity. Anthony Giddens, a British Sociologist, defines modernity as "the mode of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence"(Giddens, 1990). Through the philosophical works of philosophers like Kant, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu, the enlightenment agenda manifested itself almost in every nook and corner of the world. The main emphasis was laid down to reason, science, empiricism, universalism and individualism. In fact, European modernity by its very definition meant a rejection or questioning of tradition and a high prioritization of individualism as a basis of the new political and social order. Immanuel Kant candidly deemed it as "the light of reason" because of its general appeal of awakening the masses from the deep slumbers of orthodoxy and traditionalism. The people began to question the 'dogmatic' and 'irrational' notions in such a sweeping way where they can't think of going back to adhere &

stick with the past notions of them. But the driving vehicle upon which modernity made an inexorable entry into every possible society was colonialism. With the help of both political and intellectual backing, modernity spread very rapidly. This argument is scholarly supported by D.V. Kumar by arguing that "there is hardly any society that has remained immune to the influence of modernity and the degree to which it has impacted societies is quite profound" (Kumar, 2008:240-254). Modernity thus refers to the radical shift from fatalism to active agency, from passivity to meaningful choice, from religion to science. But because of its critical thrust, it emancipated humans from the taboos of traditionalism and obscurantism which Immanuel Kant calls "escape of man from his self-imposed immaturity" (Kant, 2015). Avijit Pathak supports this view by arguing that "the inherent dynamism of modernity implies the process of individuation: individuals can rediscover themselves unfold their potential and evolve their own life projects. Nothing can be imposed on them simply because of their birth in a caste, clan or community" (Pathak, 2006).

Despite the fact that modernity has emerged as the dominant and hegemonic category, there are different and at the same time competing ways of

looking at it. Broadly speaking, there are three ways in which scholars have looked at modernity: as a philosophical idea, as a form of society and as an experience. As an idea, it represents a radical shift from the past. It privileges universality, optimism, rationalism, science and individualism. It stands diametrically opposite to superstitions, dogmatism, blind faith and pessimism. It encourages multiple ways of looking at the world and adopts alternative ways and possibilities. In the 'pre-modern past', since the idea of God or any other form of deity was considered supreme any beyond criticism hence anything attributed to divine was beyond the pale of critical inquiry. With the advent of modernity reason, rationality and scientific method became the necessary tools of inquiry that radically altered the concepts associated with the human life leading to a radical 'godless', 'non-sacred' alternative. Through the instrument of reason, it became possible to understand and explain the world. Thus, reason became the dominant discourse through which modernity spread across the globe. The idea of modernity thus became linked with the idea of progress, enlightenment and science. The 'realities' of the past that formed the warp and woof of the traditional societies disappeared fast and the human advancement towards the achievement of the goal of a universal scientific world based on reason and science continued unabated. According to this view, modernity generated optimism and led to the decline of pessimism and deep orthodoxy that was embedded in the society.

With the rise of modernity as a new and unorthodox way of organizing social and political life and decimating the old ways of social and political organization, it needed new ideologies and conceptions for "linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together" (Anderson, 1991:9-37). The rise of modernity led to a loss of three fundamental cultural conceptions, all of great antiquity that had for centuries an axiomatic grip on men's minds. "The first of these was the idea that a particular script-language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth. It was this idea that called into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the Islamic Ummah, and the rest"(Ibid). The second victim of modernity was monarchy which was the chief form of political organization in ancient and medieval world. The monarchs were persons apart from other human beings and ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation. In this system "human loyalties were necessarily hierarchical and centripetal because the ruler, like the sacred script, was a node of access to being and inherent in it" (Ibid). The third victim of the growth of science and reason was a "conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable", which held the origins of the world and of men essentially identical leaving no scope for any theory of an evolution of man as a species like other organisms on the planet. Combined, these ideas related human

lives with one another, rooted them firmly in the forms of social and political organization, giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering, in various ways, redemption from them. The fast growth of modernity as an alternative form of life led to a slow, uneven but perpetual decline of these interlinked certainties. Though modernity offered its own alternatives for infusing a new 'spirit' and meaning into the fast emptying human life and linking new forms of organization and ideologies together, it created its own challenges, problems and unresolved contradictions that continue even today. The conflict between modernity and traditionalism that ails most of the worlds today is not new but is tied to modernity since its very birth.

Secondly, modernity characterizes a form of society which consists of distinctive social, political and economic characteristics. Economically, there was a steep increase in the production that led to the shift from agriculture to industry. Politically, there was a huge participation of people in the decision making process due to increasing democratization and decentralization. In the social sphere, there was a radical shift from particularism to universalism and to what Talcott Parson deems "collective orientation to self-orientation". The major shift that occurred from traditionalism to modernism gave rise to entirely new values where European values were considered 'dominant' and 'sacred' and traditional values were recognized as 'inferior' and 'profane'. This is what Daniel Lerner calls "the passing of traditional society" (Pathak, 2006).

Thirdly, modernity can also be looked at as an experience that is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it promises many things: progress, advancement, rationality etc. on the other hand, it seeks to destroy everything that we have and are known by. This sort of experience is melliflently grasped and argued by Marshall Berman that "there is a mode of vital experiences-experiences of space and time, of the self and others, of life possibilities and perils-that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience 'modernity'. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world-and, at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know and everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pushes us into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradictions, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of the universe in which, as Marx said, all that is solid melts into air"(Berman, 1982:240-254). To stretch the above arguments further, one gets an impression that

those who take pride in the idea of modernity by vanquishing superstitions and orthodoxy out from public domain have, to some extent, led to the deviation of man from himself. Avijit Pathak encapsulates the overall discontents of modernity arguing that “modernity causes alienation. Its bigness, impersonality and abstraction degrade human uniqueness. Its technical mentality violates nature and destroys the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between the human species and mother earth” (Pathak, 2006:18). This problem of modernity has also been explored by postmodern scholars like Bruno Latour who argues that the flawed distinction between nature and culture (society and its traditions) is at the root of the problem. With the rise of science and reason as the basis for organizing modern societies, the people started believing that the world changed irrevocably, separating us forever from our primitive, pre-modern ancestors. This was possible through a flawed set of distinctions between nature and society, between human and thing, distinctions that our benighted ancestors, in their world of alchemy, astrology, and phrenology, never made. Latour suggests, that “we should rethink our distinctions, rethink the definition and constitution of modernity itself’ in order to get rid of these self-limiting binaries” (Latour, 1993). Modernity’s preoccupation with scientific reasoning represses ‘non-rational’ faculties of human existence. By its very nature, it tends to see itself as ‘reasonable’ and ‘universal’ and thus seeking to impose homogeneity as an ordering principle, thus effectively attempting to rout heterogeneity at all levels of human existence. This discomfort of modernity with differences makes the whole world dull, uniform and homogenized.

GANDHIAN CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

There have been extremely powerful voices that positioned themselves against modernity and whatever it stood for. Broadly speaking, these opposing voices can be categorised into two: a religious critique of modernity and a secular critique that sought to engage modernity on its own terms. The proponents of critical theory and post modern theory are avid critics of modernity. The critical theory emerged out of the collective efforts of all those thinkers and scholars which later came to be known as Frankfurt School. They launched a scathing critique of modernity. They argued that “modernity led to the growth of technological rationality, consumer culture, commodification and instrumentalisation of social relations and abstract and impersonal relations. Reason instead of becoming an instrument of liberation and emancipation has, in fact, become an instrument of oppression and hegemony” (Kumar, 2008). The critical theorists believe that the two world wars, fascist regimes, socio-economic inequalities and the ecological destruction that is being inflicted is guided by dehumanising and hegemonising technological rationality. One of the best known Frankfurt school

theorists, Herbert Marcuse brings to fore the dark side of modernity arguing that “the important outcome of modernity is consumer culture which has dented revolutionary potential and social critique. People are seduced by commodities and comfort. They are content in their material affluence and happy to wallow in the false freedoms provided by leisure and sexual opportunities. The one dimensional man is a shallow person living an illusionary life and voluntarily seeking to fulfil false needs”(Marcuse, 1972:246). Modernity has in a sense constructed a false picture of material goods wherein human consciousness is utterly lost. The post modernists reject the very epistemology on which modernity is based. The essential components of the epistemology of modernity are science, objectivity, certainty, progress and truth. The post-modernists reject these enlightenment tenets. The epistemology on which modernity is based takes the position that stories and tales don’t provide real or true knowledge. They argue that stories and fables don’t comprise objective and scientific knowledge about the social reality. They consider the story version of knowledge as imperfect, illogical and traditional. This opposition of modernity is lucidly encapsulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *the post modern condition* where he sharply reacts against this understanding of modernity by considering its view of knowledge as pure which for him is actually a grand myth. He argues that one cannot possibly come across a more powerful and hegemonic myth than that of scientific or objective knowledge (Lyotard, 1984:247).

Hannah Arendt provides socio-political critique to modernity. In her *Origins of totalitarianism* she seeks to show how at the heart of modern society lays a contradiction. 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 gave them spurious sense of meaning. This is what some sociologists refer as “homelessness in cosmos” due to religious crisis that occurs in the world today (Arendt, 1973). Peter Ludwig Berger, an American sociologist, discuss on it at length by highlighting the shortcomings of modernity. He argues that with increasing mobility and migration one tends to lose the living contacts with one’s parents, siblings, one’s community and the cultural/physical landscape in which one is born. This according to him leads to the existential anguish called “homelessness”. Furthermore the author argues that there are some who can’t escape this sadness: the sadness born out of the ambiguity inherent in the modernizing process. It gives you comfort, career and opportunity; yet it deprives you of unconditional intimacy. The modern man as Berger argues suffers from what he calls “the Deeping condition of homelessness” (Berger, 1979). Despite such gains in science and technology and the resultant comfort that it has given to man, the ‘one-dimensional’ man is

anything but content and satisfied. This lack of contentment caused due to the imposition of modernity and loss of traditions has rendered the very existence of modernity as a problem itself rather than a solution to the problems of human condition.

Gandhi belonged to a group of scholars and activist who not only engaged traditional ideas and challenged the established order but also critiqued modernity and modern civilization. In his 1909 book *Hind Swaraj*, he critiqued and at times rejected the modern civilization "by articulating a civilizational alternative to it". He refused to privilege modernity's commitment to the idea of perpetual progress, its insistence on the epistemology of universal truths, its claims of generating valid and objective knowledge and its infatuation with master narratives for understanding the human condition. He gave a new meaning to the very idea of tradition by juxtaposing it with modernity. He was a practitioner and a theorist. He wanted to interpret the various ideas and at the same time follow those so as to change the world. He regarded modern civilization as satanic simply because it robs human beings from all those attributes which makes them human. Gandhian critique was not based upon religion in a customary sense. Rather the very concept of religion was broadened by means of such a critique. Gandhi's overall critique to modernity can be summed up into two broad categories by reflecting on his two important ideas.

First, Gandhi's notion of Swaraj is highly original and immensely illuminating. He aim was that a modern man must regain the power of 'soul-searching' and elevation of the 'self' and become independent of the huge techno-economic enterprise of modernity. Gandhi wanted us to see how technology has taken control of man's physical and intellectual being and has made him entirely dependent on its structures. For Gandhi, this was as dangerous as the political subjugation of colonial rulers. In order to be completely free and achieve complete independence (*poorna Swaraj*), a modern Indian needs not only to reject colonialism as a political project but also reject modernity as a civilizational project. There is no denying the fact that modern science and technological structures have made our lives comfortable and luxurious but at the same time they have also led to an "iron cage" or an "administered totality" that tends to paralyze our own reflexivity. In other words, we become totally dependent on the 'expertized' solutions emancipating from the technological elites. This, as Gandhi worried, has belittled man. If I have a problem with my neighbour I am now incapable of arriving at a solution because I become more and more dependent on the legal structure, its lawyers and courts. This is elegantly put by Gandhi in his book *Hind Swaraj* that "if people were to settle their own quarrels, a third party would not be able to exercise any authority over them. Truly, men were less unmanly when they settled their disputes either by fighting or by asking their relatives

to decide for them. They became more unmanly and cowardly when they resorted to the courts of law. It was certainly a sign of slavery when they settled their disputes by fighting. Is it any the less so, if I asked a third party to decide between you and me? Surely, the decision of a third party is not always right. The parties alone know who is right. We, in our simplicity and ignorance, imagine that a stranger, by taking our money gives us justice"(Gandhi, 1989:51-52). Gandhi sought to alter such structures that pose greater risk to the spirituality of human beings. He looked at the overarching structures of modernity which in reality was trying to take human beings away from what Gandhi termed as 'soul-force' and moral power¹⁴. Gandhi sought to revitalize villages as the most important hubs of social, cultural and political activity and was firmly opposed to the concept of the drastic urbanization of India. His critique of urbanization was grounded in his general critique of the modern civilization which favoured and required urban spaces as seats of industrial growth and development. For Gandhi, such an urban model was unsustainable in India as it is in essence "a process of double drain from the villages. Urbanization in India is slow but sure death for her villages and villagers. Urbanization can never support ninety per cent of India's population, which is living in her 7, 00,000 villages" (Gandhi, 1994). For Gandhi the myth of urban progress was central to the goals of industrial capitalism which was a major pillar on which the modern civilization was erected in the west. He saw this model as highly unsuitable, unsustainable and 'foreign' to the very idea of Indian civilization. In his opinion the questions and problems related to the ruralisation of human progress can be resolved amicably "if the youth can be persuaded to make village life their goal rather than city life". This is because; he asserted "We are inheritors of a rural civilization" (Gandhi, 1929).

Gandhi's notion of Swaraj was far deeper not just the replacement of one kind of authority by the other. It was a religious-cum-philosophical interpretation that synthesised religion and philosophy. For Gandhi modernity in essence means taking man away from his moral, spiritual and inner being which, as per Gandhi, are the most essential ingredients that makes us who we are. The pinnacle of human existence, as per Gandhi, was to delve deep in the soul force and realize the

¹⁴ For Gandhi Satyagraha, meaning civil insistence on or tenacity in the pursuit of truth, aimed to penetrate the barriers of prejudice, ill-will, dogmatism, self-righteousness, and to reach to and activate the soul of the opponent. However dogmatic or degenerate a human being might be, he has a soul, and thus the capacity to feel for other human beings and to acknowledge their common humanity. 'If the enemy realized that you have not the remotest thought in your mind of raising your hand against him or even for the sake of your life, he will lack the zest to kill you. Every hunter has had this experience. No one has heard anyone of hunting cows'. Satyagraha is a 'surgery of the soul', a way of activating 'soul force'. See Parekh, B. *Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

eternal. These were his essentials about the notion of Swaraj. For Gandhi this was a result of a blind and unconditional acceptance of the values offered by western modernity and he tried to inform and engage the general Indian public and the political class especially those associated with Indian national congress about the dangers of this blind 'Westoxification'¹⁵.

Secondly, Gandhi realized that modern civilization was based on the centrality of desire. It generates and stimulates man's desire for the ever-expanding needs and never-subsiding comforts. Thus, the man ultimately becomes a slave of desires and a prisoner of these comforts. He attributed this excessive focus on the comforts and desires to the idea of mass production that generated a colossal amount of products that needed consumers. He proposed production by the masses and firmly opposed mass production by machines. As technology continues to increase growth and improve efficiency, this has a direct effect on productivity which also increases as a result. This moves societies increasingly towards an automated future that results in fewer jobs and more consumption. This inversely proportional relationship between decreasing human labour and increasing human consumption due to an ever increasing production augurs for a very grotesque future of human civilization. Gandhi beautifully puts this in his book *Hind Swaraj* in the following words that

"...We notice that the 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 that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich or unhappy because he is poor...by observing all this; our ancestors discarded us from luxuries and pleasure" (Gandhi, 2005:51-52).

Gandhi critiqued the immoral and the unnatural force which Frankfurt School critics regard as the seduction of consumer culture. He aspired for a life truly devoid of desires. Furthermore, Gandhi critiqued modernity not because he disliked technology or scientific achievement. He was not a cultural Luddite. He discarded the instrumental rationality which was at the heart of the modern west simply because he considered it as one of the biggest hindrances for realizing the true human potential and its goal to seek the 'liberation of soul'. Gandhi argues in *Hind Swaraj* that "ideally, I will rule out all machinery, even as I would reject this very body, which is not helpful to salvation, and seek the

obsolete liberation of the soul. From that point I would reject all machinery, but machines will remain because, like the body, they are inevitable. The body itself as I told you is the purest piece of mechanism; but if it is a hindrance to the highest flights of soul, it has to be rejected" (Ibid). To stretch the arguments further, one gets an impression that for Gandhi, the only goal in life is to realize the self. He considered the love for material things as the highest obstacle for seeking self-purification. In order to realize self one has to suppress his desires. Gandhi firmly believed that "western civilization is at enmity with the human soul". He considered it diametrically opposite to Indian traditions and culture. This view is also shared by some leading modern Indian scholars who deem western modernity as totally antagonistic to traditions. A scholar like Ashis Nandy sees a "colonial aggression in modernity". He deems that modernity annihilates traditions through the ideology of nationalism, scientific planning and mythology of progress. He sees essential dualism in modernity and considers it being alleged as elitist and anti-people. Furthermore, Nandy posits that "Gandhi saw religion itself as a means of criticizing the modern civilization. It is in this context that he felt that politics and religion were not and could not be, contradictory and that to say otherwise would be to accept Machiavellism and Realpolitik as the crux of politics and to opt for unfettered instrumentalism, leading to an artificial distinction between ends and means. This itself was a criticism of modernity" (Nandy, 1981:171-194). For Gandhi religion was not confined merely to worshipping God; it encapsulates both social and political system that together forms the essential ingredients of human living and understanding of the world. Gandhi "represented a whole class of critics of the modern civilization. And, like many others in the class, he can be interpreted or re-interpreted in more than one way".

Nevertheless, Gandhian critique of modernity is somewhat balanced because it focuses on how modernity has been an unstable force and what can be done to tie it in line with traditions. He, in fact, gives new meaning to tradition by juxtaposing it with modernity. Gandhi remained against modernity because as per him, it empties culture, eliminates the every possibility of human emancipation through an embrace of traditions and morality and sweeps away all traditional order in a society that annihilates the very identity of man.

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¹⁵ The term Westoxification finds its origins in Iran from the Persian term *Gharbzadegi*. It refers to the phenomenon of non-western societies relying heavily on the west for intellectual, cultural and financial reasons. Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, a well-known Iranian thinker and writer is credited for using this term in his book *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*. See his, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, translated by R. Campbell, R (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1983)

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