

Chapter - III

GANDHI'S CRITICISM OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Introduction :

As we have seen in our first chapter ' Hind Swaraj ' is not only a political tract on political methods, its concern is essentially civilizational in the sense that Gandhi sought to develop an alternative blueprint of Indian polity, which is based on the philosophy that drew its main principles from ideas of ancient Indian thinkers, moderates, Tolstoy, Thoreau and Ruskin. Tolstoy believed that all contemporary institutions were based on force and Ruskin criticised the dehumanizing nature of modern civilization. In ' Hind Swaraj ' Gandhi wrote a very powerful critique of modern western civilization and its decadent institutions. Gandhi first discussed the merits of Indian civilization and then wrote a critique of western civilization which is based on materialism, hedonism and violence.

As indicated earlier, Gandhi was provoked into writing ' Hind Swaraj ' because of the attempts on the part of some individuals and groups to free India through the use of violent methods. Denying the view that ' Swaraj ' took its inspiration

from the English, their institutions and way of life Gandhi argues that it would mean, wanting English rule without Englishman, wanting the tiger but not its natur/, wanting to make India English. Gandhi further adds, " And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englishstan."¹ Gandhi argued that this was not the Swaraj he was striving for because such an aspiration would only spell ruin. He says, " And her ruination will come about not because of the fault of her people, but because of her acceptance of modern civilization as defivative of her way of life."²

Gandhi's Views on Indian Civilization :

According to Gandhi, Indian civilization one of the most ancient in the world, had survived the onslaught of different influences and managed to retain her identity, revealing her glory, inner strength and beauty. It is agreed by all that the present civilization of India is almost the same as it was in the past, the only point of difference being; that in the past its significance was realized, while today we are drifting away rapidly from our ideals and principles enunciated by our wise seers and which are in complete contrast to modern trends.

1) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 27.

2) Roy Ramashray - Gandhi - Soundings in Political Philosopny,
p. 4.

According to Gandhi, civilization meaning culture, refinement and social development was amply reflected in ancient India. A set of attitudes, values and beliefs conditioned the life of the people in the past, which in turn found its manifestations in every aspect of the creative activities of the people. The ancient Indian civilization is rooted in ' Dharma ' or principles of good conduct. ' Tapasya ' - self discipline had been practiced in India, since times immemorial and to Gandhi, it is only self discipline or ' tapasya ' which alone can regenerate her. It is the qualities of head and heart that alone would qualify her for independence and which would open the doors of ' Swaraj ' wide open.

Gandhi holds that, the ancient culture of India has given to the world, the message of peace, truth and non-violence. The supreme doctrine of love is the only panacea for the ills of the world. The key to the deliverance of India and the world lies in truth, non-violence and love. Love is a weapon that can transform even the wicked and evil. Love is the means to be used to conquer and win the British - to make them mend their ways and remind them of the principles of justice and benevolence, which they have lost sight of in their quest for wealth, power and status. Using violence, would only destroy the purity of end, sought to be achieved and it leaves one cold. Indian civilization is one which finds its glory not just in the spiritual world but boasts of

achievements in the fields of science, geometry and algebra. The first hospitals, art of surgery and astronomy were all known to us, centuries before they were discovered by the west. But as Ranade had rightly pointed out, that bathing in the reflected glory of our past achievements will not in any way add to it. Hence Gandhi argues that dwelling on past achievements is but a waste of our time and our energies should be channelized and harnessed towards vitalizing and regenerating her past grandeur. He says " I believe that the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our past ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate, the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has become Westernized; of China nothing can be said; but India is still somehow or other sound at the foundation."³

A charge always levelled against India by the West is that her people are uncivilized barbaric, ignorant and stolid, and it is in vain to induce her to adopt any changes. Herein lies the strength and beauty of Indian civilization. Gandhi says, " This is her beauty, it is the sheet anchor of our hope."⁴ He further goes on to add that " civilization is that mode of conduct

3) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 54.

4) Ibid., p. 55.

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 passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means good conduct."⁵

It one accepts the above definition of civilization, there will be no two views on the fact that India reflects all that is implied in the definition. It is a well known fact that Indian saints stressed upon control of indulgences and inspired people to desist from wallowing in luxuries and riches.

Gandhi opines that ancient India reflected civilization in its purest form, where people were happy with small villages. He says, it was not as if our forefathers were not aware of the knowledge of machinery, but they deliberately did not act upon it, for the obvious reason, namely that of protecting the people from the of snare of false glamour associated with the invention of machinery. Hence Gandhi argues " They saw that Kings and their swords were inferior to the sword of ethics, and they therefore, held the sovereigns of the earth to be inferior to the Rishis and the Fakirs. A nation with a constitution like this is fitter to teach others than to learn from others. This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds. Everybody knew that these professions were not particularly superior ... Justice was tolerably fair ... The common people lived independently

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5) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 55.

and followed their agricultural occupation. They ^{enjoyed} enjoyed true Home Rule."⁶ Thus Gandhi glorified the Indian civilization a great deal.

Gandhi's Criticism of Modern Civilization :

' Hind Swaraj ' contains what Gandhi himself referred to as " a severe condemnation of modern civilization ". His political \uru, phrophesized that Gandhi would himself destroy the the book after having resided in India for a year. Tolstoy on the other hand after reading the book, recorded in his diary, " Read Gandhi about civilization, wonderful"⁷. Nehru did not like the tone and tenor of the book, because he did not understand why villages should be necessarily good and cities bad. He was not prepared to accept it, as Gandhi hoped, as a blueprint for the future Indian polity.

' Hind Swaraj ' may be characterized as the high water mark of his creative thought. Gandhi wrote, " I have written because I could not restrain myself ... there views are mine and yet not mine. They are mine because I hope to act according to them. They are almost a part of my being. But yet they are not

6) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 56.

7) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 24.

mine, because I lay no claim to originality. They have been formed, after reading several books. That which I dimly, felt received support from these books."⁸ It is obvious that the writings of Mazzini, Ruskin, Thoreau and Tolstoy were influencing factors. His indictment of modern civilizations was along the lines of views expressed by Ruskin and Tolstoy.

Ashish Nandy points out, " Gandhi's major criticism was directed against the modern west and its encroachment on the rest of the globe. He called this west the modern civilization and lived with the hope that the other west would one day reassert itself, that out of the womb of the present would emerge not a single non oppressive, egalitarian, urban-industrial technocratic civilization but authentic Western and an authentic Eastern civilization, non-oppressive, egalitarian but also primarily non-urban, urban? non-industrial and non-technocratic."⁹

Gandhi's antipathy is thus directed not towards the West but towards modern civilizations. One can interpret this in the following ways - almost all his gurus were Western intellectuals. Ashish Nandy says " Even the two Indian intellectuals he believed to be his gurus were conspicuously bicultural - Rabindranath Tagore and Gopal Krishna Gokhale."¹⁰ The Gita and the Bible occupied a

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- 8) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi. p. 24.
 - 9) Nandy Ashis - Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias - Essays in Political Awareness., p.p. 128-129.
 - 10) Ibid., p. 128.

place close to his heart. Again it was Westernized Nehru who was chosen his political heir by Gandhi, rather than Vallabhai Patel. Ashish Nandy rightly points out, " Finally, by his own admission he picked up his idea of non-violence not from the Hindu scriptures but from the Sermon on the Mount." ¹¹ /s

However, we are interested in finding out what ails modern civilization and Gandhi's criticism of it. Gandhi attacks modern civilization, inspite of all its achievements, alleging to have done the greatest good to humanity and Gandhi says, " all the while conveniently forgetting that its greatest achievements are the invention of the most terrible weapons of destruction, the awful growth of anarchism, the frightful disputes between capital and labour and the wanton and diabolical cruelty inflicted on innocent dumb, living animals in the name of science, ' falsely so called'". ¹²

Reacting to the disastrous fire in Paris, Gandhi said that he felt " a grim tragedy lay behind all the tinsel splendour of modern civilization, that the ceaseless rush of living, left no time for contemplation and the dead were soon forgotten, that the marvels of science the claims of civilization and the gospel of progress could offer neither stability nor certainty nothing substantial to struggling humanity." ¹³ Raghvan Iyer thus says that,

- 11) Nandy Ashis - Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias - Essays in Political Awareness., p. 128.
- 12) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Writing of Mahatma Gandhi, p.p. 288-289.
- 13) Ibid., p. 25.

" it was not just the moral inadequacy and extravagant pretensions of modern civilizations but its treacherously deceptive hypnotic and self-destructive tendency that was the theme of ' Hind Swaraj'".¹⁴

Gandhi emphasises that modern civilization is a drug which appears to be a panacea for all ills, but this is only a half truth. For under the grab of ensuring progress and prosperity, it conceals its true nature and essence namely one of destruction.

Both Gandhi and Tolstoy felt that modern civilization enslaved rather than freed man. Gandhi maintained that all religions taught pursuit of spiritual rather than material goods. He says, " Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and all other religions teach that we should remain passive about worldly pursuits and active about godly pursuits that we should set a limit to our worldly ambition and that our religious ambition should be illimitable. Our activity should be directed into the latter channel."¹⁵ He even went so far as to maintain that humbugs in worldly matters are far worse than the humbugs in religion, that the cruelties committed in the name of religion cannot be compared to the victims destroyed in the fire of civilization. As Raghavan Iyer aptly says

14) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 25.

15) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 38.

that Gandhi felt that " religious superstition though repugnant, is harmless compared to that of modern civilization."¹⁶

Modern civilization makes bodily welfare or comfort, its target. All attention and energy is directed towards satisfaction of material pleasures, leading not only to violence but also alienating man from his religious roots. Indulging in material pleasures and weaning himself away from the spiritual world, the individual loses his original identity. Gandhi says, " this civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion. Its votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion. Some even consider it to be a superstitious growth. Others put on the cloak of religion and prate about morality. But after twenty years experience, I have come to the conclusion that immorality is often taught in the name of morality. " Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts and it fails miserably even in doing so."¹⁷ Says Gandhi.

Modern civilization makes self-interest the essence of life and this in turn causes violence to be the dominant characteristic of modern civilization. Appetites being unlimited and resources being limited, it leads to a process of what Gandhi calls " life-corroding competition ", and this in turn leads to

16) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 26.

17) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 33.

18) Roy Ramashray - Gandhi-Soundings in Political Philosophy., p.6.

exploitation oppression and inequality. That is why Gandhi describes modern civilization manifesting the maxims of 'might is right' and the 'survival of the fittest'.¹⁹ Modern civilization based as it is on violence "does not respect all life and in its progress onward, it has not hesitated to resort to wholesale destruction of even human life."²⁰

Gandhi feels that the mad rush and craze for wealth, status and position to satisfy unlimited desires has driven man to pursue professions not for their inherent value or solace it may offer but pursue a particular profession which is lucrative in nature. It is indeed a tragedy that young men and women today forgo their principles of ethics and good conduct to make a fast buck at the expense of innocent people. Deception and hypocrisy thus mark the life of many professions, namely doctors and lawyers. According to Gandhi, lawyers are responsible for the enslavement of India and have accentuated Hindu Muslim rivalry and confirmed English authority. He remarks "The profession teaches immorality, it is exposed to temptations from which few are saved."²¹

Criticising the profession of doctors he says "Sometimes, I think that quacks are better than highly qualified doctors."²²

19) Roy Ramashrays - Gandhi Soundings in Political Philosophy. p.6.

20) Ibid., p. 6.

21) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 50.

22) Ibid., p. 53.

Gandhi rightly feels that hospitals are institutions which perpetuate sins and says, " to study European medicine is to deepen our slavery."²³ Gandhi compares modern civilization to the upas tree, /t
" Its branches are represented by parasitical professions including those of law and medicine, and over the trunk has been raised the axe of true religion. Immorality is the root of the tree."²⁴

Gandhi also denounces the institution of parliamentary democracy which he feels symbolizes the evil effects of modern civilization. He informs us, " that which you consider to be the mother of parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute. Both these are harsh terms, but exactly fit the case."²⁵ Gandhi feels that the institution of parliament is like a toy which becomes a plaything in the hands of the parliamentarians who abuse it to perpetuate their own selfish interests, under the guise of protecting and promoting the aims and aspirations of the people. According to Gandhi modern civilization is responsible for multiplying the desires of the people. which become incompatible with the principle of justice which the parliament hopes to achieve. Thus Gandhi sincerely believed that the parliament was misused and exploited by a minority, projecting the image of working for the

23) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 54.

24) Ibid., p. 52.

25) Ibid., p. 28.

majority. Gandhi thus opines that the independent India of tomorrow will have to renounce not only modern civilization but parliamentary democracy too, if 'Swaraj' in its essence has to be established. /s

Impact of Modern Civilization on India :

Gandhi holds modern civilization responsible for the ills of India. Today civilization makes bodily welfare the object of life modern civilization which has eaten into the vitals of the English nation is bound to destroy India in Gandhis opinion. He goes on to say, " The British government in India constitutes a struggle between the modern civilization which is the kingdom of satan and the ancient civilization which is kingdom of God. The one is go God of war and the other is the God of love."²⁶ /hu

Gandhi hopes that his criticism of modern civilization had not shocked anyone, and frankly opines that it had done no good to India, but in fact was having a corrupting influence. It seemed to Gandhi that the chief characteristic of modern civilization was that it worshipped the body more than the spirit, and gave everything for glorifying the body. Their railways, telegraphs and telephones, did not tend to help the individual towards moral elevation.

26) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 272.

Railways according to Gandhi are responsible for the spread of bubonic plague. They are making holy lands unholy and propogating evil. He writes, " It was after the advent of railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railway that we are beginning to abolish those distinctions."²⁷

Modern civilization according to Gandhi has led to the degradation and deprivation of man. Under the grab of satisfying his unlimited needs and desires it only increases his bondage and enslavement. Man in his mad rush to satisfy his greed, thereby forgets his true nature, his true self namely one of simplicity and purity. This pathetic situation makes Gandhi's heart bleed in agony and he cannot find enough words to express his anxiety. He says " It is my delibrate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It is groaning under the monsters terrible weight."²⁸

The growing conflicts and antagonisms in society can be attributed to the evil effects of modern civilization. India a land of peace harmony and brotherhood, after the advent of modern civilization had nearly lost her identity. Again it should not be forgotten that these conflicts are not just limited to men but to

27) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 43.

28) Ibid., p. 38.

nation states too. The so-called rich, industrialized and civilized states, taking pity on the so-called backward uncivilized and ignorant peoples, decided to take upon themselves the task of civilizing them, this gracious act so performed is referred to as "white man's burden". Thus Gandhi feels that what is portrayed as modern civilization is nothing but a sharp weapon, that blunts the senses and ethics of individuals and strikes at their very essence destroying his individuality and true personality.

Thus Gandhi advice to those who are fascinated by modern civilization and have fallen prey to its evil temptations is to renounce it, because this civilization does not take note of either religion or morality. He says, "Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should not be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it."²⁹

Modern civilization being rooted in violence has to be dethroned and renounced, if we have to establish 'Swaraj'. Gandhi feels, "Civilization is like a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us."³⁰ It has created artificial needs and has uprooted man. Modern civilization strikes at the very roots of moral and religious existence. Thus the evils attributed to the Englishman should in the opinion of Gandhi be attributed to modern civilization.

29) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 34.

30) Ibid., p. 39.

Gandhi is indeed sorry that Indians have fallen prey to the false world created by modern civilization, little realizing that an element of shallowness haunts its glittering and dazzling exterior appearance. Founded on materialism and inspiring man to satisfy his worldly pleasures, it has resulted in making his life wretched and unholy. In pursuit of the temporal he slowly loses sight of his mission and is drowned in a whirlpool of apparent pleasures.

Gandhi feels that, with the usurpation by modern civilization, values have become a thing of the past and it is institutions which reflect the scale of values and therefore if there has to be a change in the essence of institutions initially there has to be a change of values.

Hence it is rightly pointed out by Raghavan Iyer that " Modern civilization was for Gandhi a positive menace to the moral growth of man rather than simply a magnifying mirror of his moral deficiency."³¹ Man being a slave to his desires and passions lets civilization take control of him and gets so intoxicated under its influence under no circumstances is he ready to sacrifice it, even if it means his destruction. Modern civilization has no soul and it destroys ones soul. " He goes on to say " And where this cursed

31) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 31.

modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before. The English do not rule over them, nor will you ever rule over them."³²

Thus it is the opinion of Gandhi that modern civilization developed in the West is exercising evil influence on the Indian people. British imperialism is the ugly side of this oppressive system. Therefore he holds that India's true home rule could not be established by driving the British rulers out of the country but struggling against the evils of modern civilization.

Gandhi Concept of Civilization :

Gandhi's own concept of civilization is unique and inspiring. As was Rousseau's cry, "back to nature", so is that of Gandhi, the parallel being found in the need to revitalize and unleash forces of the past, which holds the key to our search for 'Swaraj'.

For Gandhi civilization was not to be identified with material, scientific and technological advancement. As Ashish Nandy aptly says, "He rejected machine civilization, not because he was a saint making occasional forays into the secular world but because he was a political activist and thinker with strong moral concerns."³³

32) Gandhi M. K. - Hind Swaraj., p. 56.

33) Nandy Ashish - Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias - Essays in Political Awareness., p. 160.

A civilization which concentrates only on material progress to the detriment of spiritual advancement is not worth its name. According to Gandhi, civilization should lead us to the path of duty and one which fails to do so, and in fact helps the individual to stray away from his duty is evil in nature and should be dethroned. Such a civilization debases human values. Civilization Gandhi feels should be inspirational in the sense that it should motivate man to achieve higher values. It should instill in him a sense of self-discipline and self-control. These twin concepts will alone free man from his bondage and enslavement. When one is free from the control of passions and desires over the mind, man takes possession of himself and thus becomes truly free i.e. when he himself and not his desires or passions dominate, activate and direct his thinking process, Gandhi feels foreign rule will automatically vanish. Hence civilization in the Gandhian sense, is the alternative answer to 'Swaraj'.

Can there be unity between the East and West
through Modern Civilization :

Addressing a meeting in London in 1909, Gandhi spoke about modern civilization. He spells out his conclusion of that address in a letter addressed to Mr. Polak. He believes that the so-called barrier between East and West is non-existent and only

an illusion. He says, " There is no such thing as Western or Eastern civilization, but there is a modern civilization, but there is a modern civilization which is purely material."³⁴

Gandhi expressed the view that before modern civilization had encroached upon European territory, they shared a lot in common with the East and adds " ... even today, Europeans who are not touched by modern civilization are far better able to mix the Indians than the offsprings of that civilization."³⁵

Gandhi feels that Indians in their moment of weakness had fallen prey to the riches and wealth offered by the British Gandhi thus logically derives the conclusion that, " It is not the British people who are ruling India, but it is modern civilization, through its railways, telegraphs, telephones and almost every invention, which has been claimed to be a triumph of civilization."³⁶

To Gandhi the only solution, to the problem of the rift between the East and the West is either renunciation of modern civilization by the West or its acceptance by the East. But Gandhi believes that such a union grounded on the latter, would not in the true sense of the term lead to harmony, and peaceful co-existence, since the basic tenet of modern civilization is that it is

34) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 293.

35) Ibid., p. 293.

36) Ibid., p. 293.

grounded on violence. A truce of such a sort would therefore be a temporary one bound to erupt sooner or later and sour relations.

Gandhi draws our attention to the truth, staring us in our face that material development never leads to and is not conducive to spiritual progress. He says, " India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learnt during the past fifty years."³⁷

Conclusion :

In this chapter we have studied Gandhi criticism of modern civilization which is based on materialistic philosophy. He has expressed the opinion that India should not abandon her glorious ancient civilization for the sake of modern civilization, because the purpose of Indian Home Rule is to free India from British dominance as well as the dominance of western civilization. He concludes that by expelling the Britishers and by retaining there institutions, we will not solve the problem of India's ' Swaraj '. In the next chapter we will highlight the essence of the method provided by Gandhi to the people to face the mighty British namely Passive Resistance or Satyagraha as he called it later.

37) Iyer Raghavan - The Moral and Political Writing of Mahatma Gandhi., p. 294.