

Gandhi's 'Hind-Swaraj' : An Ambedkarian Critique

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Ever since post modernism and post-colonialism have acquired ascendancy in the academy, M.K. Gandhi's forgotten work, namely "Hindu Swaraj", composed over a century ago, has been retrieved from the oblivion and turned into a veritable 'Bible' by those who style themselves critics of the empire and modernity. This little booklet, originally written in Gujrati and subsequently translated into English by Gandhi himself, is hailed as an authoritative and definitive repudiation of modernity and Western civilization. It is contended that this political tract offers a solution to the ills of modernity and is eulogized as the last refuge of the embattled humanity.

In the present paper, I aspire to present a counter-point to this exaggerated veneration of the text. The critique we want to offer derives from the critical modernist philosophy.¹ of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. It is noteworthy that the book in question is in a dialogic form. An imaginary nationalist youth, who is anxious for the country's instant freedom from the alien rule, engages in a riveting dialogue with Gandhi. But in reality, the book represents a soliloquy, for the questioner hardly poses any probing questions to Gandhi.

The Mahatma commences his assault on the modern civilization, in general and the western civilization in particular, by equating civilization with corporeality and hedonism. The Western civilization is accused of being ir-religious and promoting physicality and

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unbridled consumption.² Gandhi even goes to the extent of calling the western civilization as satanic one. It is believed that whatever afflicts humanity is due to the latter. While condemning civilization, Gandhi is blissfully oblivious of the fact that what he is haranguing at is only an aspect of modernity. Primary of reason, belief in progress and freedom and eventual emancipation of the oppressed and exploited are some of the characteristics of cultural modernity, which are logically and metaphysically distinct from hedonism and consumerism which Gandhi is so critical of. Gandhi mounts a ferocious attack on the institutions we normally associate with modernity such as the law, medicine, and courts of justice etc.

In disparaging railways, Gandhi is convinced that railways enabled the British to take control of India. Railways, argues, Gandhi, impoverished India. However, one is scandalized when he avers that railways have spread bubonic plague, for without them people could not move from place to place.³ Further, he holds railways responsible for famines. Let him speak for himself-

“Railways have also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain and it is sent to the dearest markets”.⁴ How does an Ambedkarite look upon the phenomenon called railways? Untouchability is an institution and practice peculiar to the Indian subcontinent premised on the notion of the stigmatized body, sanctified and legitimized by the religions scriptures. Hence, the categories of the stigmatized space, touch and its absence are central to dalit experience. Consequently, a dalit would welcome railways, for it provides for the possibility of touch and intermingling that the stigmatized spaces of the dalits settlement would deny her. Thus, a dalit would embrace railways as it gives her the sense of inclusion in the public sphere.

It is argued by Gandhi, in discrediting railways, that the God never meant humans to travel long distances. Therefore, railways and analogous modes of transportation are un-natural.⁵

This argument is absurd in the face of it. For the historical

experience testifies that mass-migrations have been common and recurrent phenomena in human history. People walked long distances and crossed the continents. The spirit of adventure and exploring terra-incognita has been as natural as segregation.

It is perplexing to note that not only the railways but the modern professions such as the law and medicine also become the object of reproach, for Gandhi. The doctor is accused of promoting and fostering indulgence by curing the body artificially and unnaturally. It is assumed that illness and disease arise due to the human being's indulgence and it is believed that left to itself the body would recover naturally without requiring intervention by the physician. Gandhi thinks that the physician's intervention through the pill induces the patient to indulge herself more. To quote Gandhi himself-

“The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. My body thereby felt more at ease, but my mind became weakened. A continuation of a course of medicine must, therefore, result in loss of control over the mind.”⁶

Are these pronouncements against modern medicine justified and justifiable? Gandhi's position assumes many things. On the one hand, it assumes a dichotomy between the body and mind, giving primacy and supremacy to the latter, and presumes that human ailments are caused by negligence and indulgence, on the other. The purported dichotomy between the body and mind has been challenged and discredited by the renowned philosopher Gilbert Ryle in his magnum opus “The concept of mind”. In this book, Professor Ryle challenges the assumed dichotomy between the body and mind and christens it as “The category mistake”. The category mistake⁷ arises when those concepts and usages which are legitimately applicable to one sphere are illegitimately applied to the other sphere. Gandhi is guilty of committing the category mistake when he says that mind is weakened by the use of the medicine. The term ‘weak’ is logically applicable to the body but not to the mind. Gandhi presumes that ailments are caused by human indulgence, as we saw in the preceding passage. But

this is not necessarily true. Many a disease is caused by the genetic mutations and the changes wrought by the nature, the fact Gandhi chooses to ignore.

It would be revealing to note that the Mahatma's entire social and political philosophy is marked by the methodological individualism which affirms that every social experience and event is to be eventually traced to the individual decisions and choices. This supposition underlies his harangue against the physician and medicine. This view is utterly unhistorical, denying and belittling the decisive and formative role played by the impersonal social structures. Gandhi does not even spare education from his relentless attack and finds fault with the very idea of universal and compulsory education.⁸ For Gandhi, education is merely the matter of a knowledge of letters, only an instrument that may be used or abused.

This is merely a consequentialist view of education which is ethically indefensible, politically conservative and socially reactionary. Education is an intrinsic value, consequently only a deontological perspective could do justice to the ideal of education. It is our deeply held conviction that formal education is indispensable and essential for the flowering of human personality. Education is not merely a knowledge of letters, as Gandhi would have us believe. Education is a means to understand the world and ourselves, affording us a critically thought out world view. In the following quotation, Gandhi looks askance at the idea of imparting knowledge to the common man. He affirms-

“A peasant earns his bread honestly. He has ordinary knowledge of the world. He knows fairly well how he should behave towards his parents, his wife, his children and his fellow villagers. He understands and observes the rules of morality. But he can not write his own name. what do you purpose to do by giving him a knowledge of letters? Will you add an inch to his happiness?”⁹

In the foregoing passage, Gandhi seems to appreciate the happiness born of ignorance and unreflective observance of the rules

of morality. But the question is whether this happiness is desirable. It would seem that an unhappy reflective life is more desirable than the life of happiness born of nescience. In effect, emergence of the life of unhappy criticality is pre-requisite for emergence of the free individual.

Further, to a Dalit, Gandhi's views on education might smack of the brahminical design to deprive the subaltern castes of education and learning that have been the preserve of the twice-born castes. It would seem, judging from his views on education, that Gandhi would endorse only knowing how, i.e. the practical learning.¹⁰ However, as the history of human civilization attests, "knowing that" namely, theoretical knowledge is as much critical as practical know how. Universalisation of education, which Gandhi is opposed to, facilitates the emergence of the life of the mind which the hindu tradition denies to the vast section of the masses in India.

"Hind Swaraj" is celebrated for its anti-technological strand of thought. Gandhi rather counter intuitively denigrates machinery and the civilization based upon it. Having pointed out how machinery impoverished, demolished and exploited India, Gandhi goes on to denounce machine as great Sin.¹¹ It is argued that if India adopted machinery, she would become unhappy land. The following passage from "Hind Swaraj", where he deprecates machinery and technology, deserves full quotation.

"Machine is like a snake hole which may contain from one to hundred snakes.... The honest physician will tell you where means of artificial locomotion have increased, the health of the people has suffered."¹²

How do these ideas of Gandhi on machinery and its ill consequences compare with those of Ambedkar's on the same subject? Ambedkar saw in the machinery and industrialization the promise of emancipation for the people of India. In his celebrated work entitled "What congress and Gandhi have done to the untouchables, Babasaheb Ambedkar examines and subjects to critical

scrutiny the philosophy called Gandhism. The former points out that the accusations of Gandhi against the machine are not novel; they have been favorite themes of the anti-intellectualist thinkers such as Rousseau, Ruskin and Tolstoy.¹³ He will admit that machinery has generated many evils. He, however, denies that they are due to machine and modern civilization. He states-

“For the evils are not due to machinery and modern civilization. They are due to wrong social organization which has made private property and pursuit of personal gain matters of absolute sanctity. If machinery and civilization have not benefited everybody, the remedy is not to condemn machinery and civilization but to alter the organization of society so that benefits will not be usurped by the few but will accrue to all.”¹⁴

In the forgoing passage what Ambedkar is suggesting is the socialist re-structuring of the economy and society. But Gandhi would have none of it, for he has a deep rooted distrust of modern structures such as the state and machinery.

Gandhi is accused of promoting primitivism and return to nature. In Gandhism, there is no hope for the common man, for it treats humans as merely animals by laying excessive emphasis on manual labour and by deriding technology.

Dr. Ambedkar concedes that humans do share the constitution and functions of animals, nutritive reproductive etc. They, however, are not distinctively human functions. Distinctively human function is reason which consists in observing, meditating, cogitating studying and discovering the beauties of the universe and in enriching human life. According to Ambedkar, while the ultimate goal of the brute's life is satiation of his physical appetites, the ultimate end of human life is not the satisfaction of physical necessities, but the cultivation of mind.¹⁵

Thus, what distinguishes a human being from the brute is culture. Culture is not possible for the brute, but it is essential for a human being. Ambedkar is convinced that cultivation of mind is possible only

when there is adequate amount of leisure available to every human being. A person can devote herself to the life of the mind when she has sufficient leisure. How leisure is to be rendered available to all? What does leisure mean? Ambedkar emphatically affirms that leisure means lessening of the toil and effort necessary for satisfying the physical wants of life. The realization of leisure is impossible unless some means are found where by the toil required for producing goods necessary to satisfy human needs is lessened. What can lessen such toil? Only when machine takes the place of humans.¹⁶ There is no other means of producing leisure. Ambedkar concludes by stating that the machinery and modern civilization are indispensable for emancipating humans from leading the life of a brute.

That there could be an ethical dimension to machine and technology is glossed by Gandhi. It can be demonstrated that machine has a moral implication by pointing out the state of manual scavengers in India. Given the salience of hideous caste system and the dictates of Manu, only the persons belonging to the dalit community engage in manual scavenging, resulting in the loss of life and self esteem. The Indian state, under the influence of the brahminical ideology, will not introduce automation to safeguard the lives and self respect of those involved in this degrading labour. If the modern machine were introduced to nullify manual scavenging, so many lives could be saved and dignity restored.

Gandhi's scorn for machinery is incompatible with the idea of democracy. A society which does not believe in democracy may be indifferent to machinery and the civilization based upon it. But a democratic society can not. An aristocratic society could be content with life of leisure and culture for the few and a life of toil and drudgery for the many. But a democratic society must assure a life of culture and leisure to each of its citizen. Ambedkar forcefully asserts that if the life of leisure and culture is to be available to all, then slogan of a democratic society must be more machinery and more civilization.¹⁷

As we will have seen, having reviled everything modernity and civilization signify, Gandhi goes on to conjure up his idea of a perfect civilization. Indian civilization is the supreme civilization possessed of the virtue of antiquity with an emphasis on the performance of duty and morality.¹⁸ Here, Gandhi's equation of the Indian civilization with the Hindu civilization is unmistakable. He presumes that the Indian civilization is a monolith composed of homogeneous fabric. However, this presumption is erroneous on the face of it. Each tradition is comprised of the contending and conflicting currents of thought and action. The Indian civilization has been fashioned through the conflict and conciliation between the non-Brahminical, i.e. Shramanic and the Vaidik or Brahminical tradition. Gandhi rather uncritically ignores the essentially contested terrain of tradition and civilization. One would expect him to be more self-reflective while extolling the putative virtues of the Hindu civilization. Gandhi, however, does not even mention the institution of untouchability, let alone criticize it. In effect, Gandhi was the staunch upholder of the caste system and village community based on it.¹⁹

What can we say of "Hind Swaraj" by the way of an assessment? Gandhi's condemnation of modernity and civilization assumes many things. He assumes that the Indian civilization is essentially spiritual and religious, while the Western civilization is materialistic. Apparently, the fore-going presupposition is untenable. Because it is well attested that in the Indian tradition there has been a robust and vigorous tradition of materialism and this worldliness.

Indeed, Gandhi's dogmatic assertion that the Indian civilization is essentially ascetic and spiritual flies in the face of the facts. And at the deeper level, it is symptomatic of orientalism.²⁰

The orientalist thinkers willfully portrayed the Indian civilization as other worldly and ascetic, glossing over the living traditions of skepticism, materialism and rationality. In contradiction to his own self definition as the "other" of the Western civilization, Gandhi seems to be labouring under the categories of knowledge produced by

orientalists, who had an ulterior motive in depicting Indian civilization as passive, ascetic and spiritual. Indeed, modernity itself is a differentiated and heterogeneous phenomenon. There have been the philosopher within modernity who have been highly critical of a certain aspects of it, while still posing faith in the emancipatory potential of modernity. Max Weber and Karl Marx may be taken to be the critical modernists, for they tried to provide of the critique of the capitalist society with its evils of alienation, exploitation, excessive rationalization and dehumanization. They, however, believed in the possibility of society free from the aforementioned blemishes.

Hind Swaraj is best understood as the text rooted in the context of the appearance of the nascent nationalism. A subjugated people require re-definition and reimagining of their 'self'. Consequently, Gandhi's attack on western civilization and everything she designates is to be seen as an endeavour to induce the sense of self-confidence among the people of India. Taking a cue from Marx, we can asset that ideas have no trans-historical validity and they are to be historicised in order to comprehend their true import. In this light alone, we will be able to apprehend, the outrageous excesses of "Hind Swaraj".

In conclusion, it may be urged that the "Hindu Swaraj" is essentially the product of putative hindu nationalism and embodies the characteristics of the same. The emergence of misology, namely, the contempt of "reason" in the academy, combined with ecological crisis wrought by the predator capitalism, has compelled many of the thinkers to revert to faith and tradition. However, what is required is the affirmation enlightenment values of rationality, progress and human emancipation while negating catastrophic capitalism. In the Indian context, this entails annihilation of caste and adoption of democratic socialism.

References :

1. Critical modernism refers to that stream of modernity which underscores the blemishes and deficiencies of modernity while still adhering to her

emancipatory promise. Babasaheb Ambedkar critically appropriated many of the categories of political and cultural modernity such as scientific rationality freedom, nation, and citizenship etc.

2. Gandhi, M. K. Hind Swaraj, Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi, 2006, p. 39
3. Ibid, p. 40
4. Ibid, p. 41
5. Ibid, p. 68
6. Ibid, p. 52
7. Ryle, Gilbert, The concept of mind, Hatington Press, New York, 1949, p. 24
8. Gandhi, M. K., Hind Swaraj, Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi, 2006, p. 79
9. Ibid, p. 79
10. The contemporary analytic philosopher called Gilbet Ryle, drew a distinction “Knowing how” and “Knowing that” noting that “Knowing that” implied the knowledge of the facts, while “knowing how” entailed the knowledge of doing (The Concept of Mind, Hatington Press, New York, 1949, p. 44
11. Gandhi, M.K., Hind Swaraj, Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi, 2006, p. 79
12. Ibid, p. 80
13. Ambedkar, B.R., Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, Vol. 9, p. 282
14. Ibid, p. 288
15. Ibid, p. 288
16. Ibid, p. 284
17. Ibid, p. 285
18. Gandhi, M.K., Hind Swaraj, Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi, 2006, p. 54
19. Qouted in Ambedkar’s “What the congress and Gandhi have done for the untouchables”, Vol. 9, p. 280
20. Orientalism is that body of thought produced by the Europeans which constructs the cultural memory of the colonial people with a view to perpetuate its domination. Edward Said, the literary critic, wrote the book “Orientalism” in 1978. In this book he laid bare the conspiracy of the European historians to secure the empire’s hegemony by eulogizing the pasts of the colonial subjects.
