

On the Hind Swaraj Critique of Modernity

Satish K. Jain*

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Hind Swaraj¹ is a severe critique of modernity. In Gandhi's own words (in the preface of 1938 edition of Hind Swaraj): *'The booklet is a severe condemnation of 'modern civilization'. It was written in 1908. My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India will discard 'modern civilization', she can only gain by doing so.'* From a close reading of Hind Swaraj it appears that there are at least three different strands of normative considerations from which his opposition to modernity is arising.

Although India, right from ancient times, has had many different streams of religious and philosophical thought, most remarkably certain core ideas have been common to all Indic religions and philosophical traditions. For instance, all Indic religions put renunciation on the highest pedestal. Anyone identifying oneself with this tradition is bound to be repulsed by a civilization that values material achievements the most. There can be little doubt that, notwithstanding many important Western influences on Gandhi, with respect to this core Indian civilizational idea he was quintessentially Indian. There is a considerable segment of his criticism of modern civilization that can be understood in terms of Gandhi looking at modernity as embodying negation of this core Indian civilizational idea. His personal asceticism and his life-long yearning for moksha are also consistent with his having internalized the core ideas of Indic religious and philosophical traditions. In this context it is interesting that Gandhi differentiates between the modern West and the pre-modern Christian West. A part of Gandhian rejection of modernity can also be understood in terms of his commitment to non-violence. His antipathy towards modern technology to a considerable extent stemmed from his belief that it was inherently violent. Kumarappa (1945, 1951) in his writings has elucidated the implications of choice of technology for the degree of violence that can be expected in the society. Thus to a

*Email: satish.k.jain@gmail.com

¹Hind Swaraj is generally regarded as the most authoritative of Gandhi's writings.

considerable extent Gandhian critique of modern civilization can be understood in terms of Gandhi's commitment to non-violence and his internalization of the idea of renunciation and non-possession as highest virtues in sharp contradistinction with exaltation of material achievements for enhancing bodily comforts.²

However, not all his criticism of modern civilization is explainable in these terms. A civilization that strives for material achievements and considers seeking of hedonistic fulfilment as rational and virtuous may not be a good civilization from the vantage point of view of a set of values that regard limitation of wants and non-possession as great virtues, but prima facie there is no reason why such a civilisation cannot last for a long time. Also there is no reason why such a civilization should not be able to deliver what it strives for, namely, material comforts. There are passages in *Hind Swaraj* to the effect that the modern civilization cannot last long³ and that it would not be able to achieve what it strives for⁴. In order to understand Gandhi's belief in the transient nature of modern civilization and his belief that it would not be able to succeed in its goals, one has to analyze, and to a certain extent generalize, his understanding of and insights pertaining to the interplay between institutions and values on the one hand, and between ends and means on the other.

Gandhi's disapproval of modernity in *Hind Swaraj* extends to all its facets; modern institutions, particularly legal and political institutions, come in for especially sharp criticism. Gandhi's criticism of these institutions has been much discussed and commented upon. Gandhi is also highly disapproving of the institution of market, the dominant institution of our times.⁵ The Gandhian critique of modern institutions, like that of other facets of modernity, is predominantly normative in character. For understanding how Gandhi viewed modern institutions the following passage regarding lawyers is extremely important:⁶

The latter's duty is to side with their clients and to find out ways and arguments in favour of the clients to which they (the clients) are often strangers. If they do not do so they

² '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.' *Hind Swaraj* p. 57.

³ Gandhi calls modern civilization 'a nine days' wonder' (*Hind Swaraj* p. 95). On p. 33, he says: 'This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed.'

⁴ 'Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so.' *Hind Swaraj* p. 33.

⁵ 'They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods. That they cannot do so is true, but the blame will not be theirs. They will leave no stone unturned to reach the goal.' *Hind Swaraj*, p. 37.

⁶ *Hind Swaraj* pp. 50-51.

will be considered to have degraded their profession. The lawyers, therefore, will, as a rule, advance quarrels instead of repressing them. Moreover, men take up that profession, not in order to help others out of their miseries, but to enrich themselves. It is one of the avenues of becoming wealthy and their interest exists in multiplying disputes. It is within my knowledge that they are glad when men have disputes. Petty pleaders actually manufacture them. Their touts, like so many leeches, suck the blood of the poor people.

Here Gandhi is making a significant point. He is saying that the modern legal institutions are so structured that it is almost inevitable that they would lead to social disharmony. If an individual is primarily motivated by self-interest and finds fulfilment mainly in material things then the practice of law under a modern legal system provides one way for the realization of such preferences. On the other hand, if an individual has values and preferences which are more geared towards truth and justice, and if he acts in accordance with them, then his behaviour is likely to secure the disapproval of his peers in the profession on account of its not being in conformity with the norms and ethos of the profession. In other words, the modern legal institutions are such that, while being quite efficacious in giving articulation to preferences and values resulting in social disharmony, they are quite unresponsive to individual values and preferences geared to the ideals of truth and justice. This particular point comes out clearly in the following passage:⁷

‘Whenever instances of lawyers having done good can be brought forward, it will be found that the good is due to them as men rather than as lawyers. All I am concerned with is to show you that the profession teaches immorality; it is exposed to temptation from which few are saved.’

Generalizing Gandhi’s observations on the legal profession, one reaches the important conclusion that social institutions play a vital role in both articulating and suppressing preferences and values of individuals comprising the society. Given a particular institution, not every kind of preferences and values can be articulated through it; and given certain preferences and values, not every institution can articulate them. In other words, for articulation of different kinds of individual values and preferences different institutions are required. Consequently it follows that the choice of the institutional structure is highly significant from a normative perspective. This point can be made more explicit by considering the example of the institution of market from this perspective. The institution of market is highly responsive to individual values and preferences provided the preferences and values are backed by money. If a set of preferences and values are not backed by money they would have little or no impact on the market outcome. Market, like

⁷Hind Swaraj p. 50.

any other institution, filters in only some kinds of preferences and values under certain circumstances and filters out the remainder. For instance, if left to market, a small number of individuals pursuing activities resulting in loss of biodiversity would have greater decisiveness on the eventual outcome than a large number of people interested in ensuring survival of species if resources at the command of the former are greater than the latter.

In view of the close relationship between the institutional structure and the values which get articulated, one could find an institutional structure unacceptable either because the values which get articulated through it are the ones one disapproves of or alternatively because the values which are important to one get filtered out by it. There can be little doubt that part of the reason why Gandhi found modernity unacceptable was because in his view, as enunciated in *Hind Swaraj*, modern institutions were to be faulted on both these counts. This point comes out repeatedly in *Hind Swaraj* when Gandhi is talking about lawyers, doctors and parliamentarians.

But the Gandhian perspective on the relationship between institutions and values is not confined to the above point only. In fact, a careful reading of *Hind Swaraj* makes it clear that the Gandhi's understanding of the relationship between institutions and values was both sophisticated and insightful. As mentioned earlier, one reason why Gandhi is so critical of modern civilization is that in his opinion it puts too much emphasis on bodily comforts.⁸ Obsession with bodily comforts was bound to be viewed negatively by someone like Gandhi, who devoted his entire life for higher purposes. So while an unflattering evaluation of a civilization mainly concerned with material benefits is quite understandable by someone who valued material benefits so little, his rather intriguing remark mentioned earlier to the effect that:

Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so.

is not. Why should a civilization which seeks to increase bodily comforts fail in doing so? We will see that it is in the process of understanding this assertion by Gandhi that one begins to comprehend the normative framework within which Gandhi formulated his critique of modernity. There are two different, although interrelated, ways in which one can think of values in relation to their material implications. In the sequel we consider both these approaches.

⁸*'Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life.'* *Hind Swaraj*, p. 31. According to Suhrud (2010): *'This is an inadequate rendering of the original Gujarati, which could be rendered as 'Its true identity is in the fact that people seek to find in engagement with the material world and bodily comfort meaning and human worth.'*

When individuals act in accordance with certain ethical values material advantages of various kinds tend to flow for the society as a whole. For instance, truthful behavior on the part of individuals brings about tremendous reductions in social costs of acquiring information and doing things by diminishing or doing away altogether with the need for verification of information and supervision of activities. Thus behavior in accordance with certain ethical principles is instrumentally valuable for the society. From an analytical point of view it is important to distinguish between two kinds of situations which can give rise to behavior conforming to an ethical principle. An individual might act in conformity with an ethical principle because he values the principle for its own sake. One does not tell lies because doing so, other things being equal, will make one less happy compared to when one is telling the truth. When an individual values an ethical principle for its own sake, we will say that he has internalized the principle. It is, however, possible for behaviour to be in conformity with an ethical principle without the person having internalized the principle in question. If the circumstances are such that behaviour in violation of the ethical principle will result in a worse outcome for the individual compared to the behaviour in conformity with the principle then even if the person does not value the principle for its own sake he will find it in his own interest to act in conformity with the principle. If penalties for speaking untruths are severe then one can expect even potentially very untruthful persons to avoid telling lies.

A person who values an ethical principle for its own sake will suffer diminution in well-being if he acts in violation of the principle. In other words, a person who has internalized an ethical principle will incur internal costs in case of behavior violative of the principle. On the other hand, someone who does not value an ethical principle for its own sake does not face any such internal costs. Such a person however will face external costs in case of behavior violative of the ethical principle in question if there are penalties for such behavior. Thus, in one case the costs of behavior violative of the ethical principle are internal, possibly both internal and external, and in the other case purely external. This difference in the nature of costs has important material implications.

When one is dealing with persons who have not internalized a particular ethical value, behavior in conformity with the ethical value can in certain circumstances be obtained by instituting an appropriate set of rules and regulations. In connection with rules and regulations designed to induce particular kinds of behavior on the part of individuals two important points need to be noted. First, designing of appropriate rules and regulations and their implementation and enforcement require resources and consequently are not costless. Secondly, it is not always the case that one can find a set of rules which would induce the desired kind of behaviour on the part of individuals. Indeed, it would rarely

be the case that there would exist a set of rules which would induce the individuals to act in conformity with a particular ethical principle notwithstanding the fact that they do not value the principle intrinsically.

Thus we see that when individuals value certain ethical principles for their own sake, i.e., intrinsically, then there are some unintended consequences of a positive and material character; and on the other hand when behaviour in conformity with these principles is generated by incentives and penalties then some of the positive consequences either do not obtain or obtain to a lesser degree. In other words, when a certain kind of behaviour is the product of non-materialistic motives we find that as a by-product it is conducive to material gains also; and on the other hand when the same behavior is the product of materialistic motives, the material gains tend to be smaller compared to the former case.

From this it follows that if in a society individuals by and large are motivated in their actions by material considerations, and not by ethical principles, then notwithstanding their desire for material gains, their realization by the society may not be proportionate to the actions. That is to say, if a society's obsession with material aspects crosses a certain threshold point then it will become incapable of realizing the very things it is obsessed with. Thus one way to understand the Gandhian belief that in the ultimate analysis the modern civilization will not be able to achieve what it is obsessed with can be understood in the terms discussed above. Gandhi believed that the modern civilization's obsession with the material comforts will eventually dilute the ethical basis to such an extent that the very obsession because of which this dilution will take place will become unattainable.

Another, but related, way to understand the Gandhian belief of modernity not succeeding in its material goals is to focus on the prerequisites for an institutional structure to be conducive for the attainment of the goals for which it has been designed in the first place. Now, whether one considers a single organization or the society at large, for the smooth performance of myriad of functions which are required it is essential that individuals who have been assigned the task of performing these functions discharge their duties faithfully. If individuals are committed to the facilitating ethical principles one can expect that by and large they will perform their assigned tasks in the required manner. In the absence of internalization of the required ethical principles it is unlikely that the individuals will perform their assigned tasks faithfully unless there is external intervention. As noted earlier, in some cases interventions might be able to make the individuals perform their assigned tasks satisfactorily; but these interventions would require resources which otherwise could be used for material benefits. In other cases, however, it will not be possible to devise a way by which the individuals could be made to perform the assigned tasks

as required for proper functioning of the societal institutional structure in question. Thus one will have to settle for an imperfectly working societal institutional structure. But this means that certain societal objectives will be unattainable. An excellent illustration of this is provided by the institutions of justice. It is immediate that unless judges and other important functionaries are committed to the ideal of justice and are able to transcend their self-interest while performing their assigned tasks there is very little possibility of judicial institutions being able to realize the objectives for which they are created.⁹

It is clear from the above that a certain minimum level of other-regardingness, i.e., consideration for others, is a necessary condition for any institutional structure at the societal level to continue to exist. If the domain of self-interest expands to such an extent that even this minimal level of other-regardingness does not obtain then the continued existence of the institutional structure will no longer be possible. Now, once one recognizes that the dominant institutions of the society have profound influence on individuals, it becomes clear that if the dominant institutions are such that their functioning tends to increase the domain of self-interest and decrease the domain of other-regarding values beyond the acceptable limits then the entire institutional structure may become at risk.

This leads in a natural way to the idea of normative unsustainability of institutional structures. If the values which are induced by an institutional structure are such that they are inconsistent with the continued existence of the institutional structure which induced them in the first place, then the institutional structure in question is unsustainable. The idea of unsustainability of institutional structures helps us understand the Gandhian beliefs of a civilization centred around the idea of material comforts in the ultimate analysis being transitory in nature and not succeeding in its own primary objective.¹⁰ At a deep level Gandhi understood the relationship between the expansion of market and the enlargement of the domain of self-interest. It is because of this reason that he made disapproving remarks regarding turning the whole world into a market.

Gandhi was a firm believer in the organic unity of means and ends. For him, change of

⁹To give another example, the institution of parliament in theory finds its justification in terms of various ideals including that of as a locator of social good. If parliamentarians transcend their narrow interests and think of various alternatives facing the society solely from the perspective of common good, then it makes perfect sense to argue that, more often than not, what the majority will decide after debate and discussion will be the correct decision from the point of view of social good. But if parliamentarians, by and large, decide matters from the perspective of their own welfare, then it is highly unlikely that their decisions would be in the best interests of the society as a whole.

¹⁰It is clear that if a society is ecologically unsustainable, or unsustainable in some other sense, then it must necessarily be normatively unsustainable. Thus normative sustainability is a sufficient condition for sustainability in other respects.

means in general implied change of ends.¹¹ His understanding of the relationship between the nature of technology and the nature of its products parallels his understanding of the relationship between ends and means.¹² One of the most interesting insights developed by Gandhi, although in all likelihood of marginal importance in his own times, but of the greatest importance and relevance for contemporary times, establishes a connection between the technology and the nature of products it makes possible. While in the general perception modern techniques of production are associated with increased productivity, it is not often that one differentiates between the product manufactured with the traditional technique and the product made possible with the modern technique. The occasions when one does differentiate, it is because one wants to draw attention to the superior quality of the product manufactured by the modern technique compared to that of the product made using the traditional technique. It is rarely the case that the product made using the modern technique is compared unfavourably with the product manufactured using the traditional technique. Gandhi considered most products of modern technology to be inferior to the corresponding products of traditional technology. During Gandhi's lifetime not many subscribed to Gandhi's viewpoint. But in the contemporary context, at least with respect to food items, support for the Gandhian view may be quite substantial. Gandhian viewpoint regarding the nature of the relationship between technology and the products made possible by it becomes much clearer if one includes among products all the by-products as well, whether desirable or undesirable. In all likelihood, part of the reason why he believed that in the ultimate analysis even with respect to things that the modern civilization was striving for it would not be successful was due to his perception regarding the nature of modern technology and the kind of relationship that subsisted between it and what it could help produce.

We restate the above twin, and important, points emphasizing the crucial significance

¹¹ *'If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay you for it; and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?'* Hind Swaraj pp. 67-68.

¹² Gandhi's perception that many products of modern technology were inferior to the products of traditional indigenous technology was only one among several reasons because of which he was opposed to modern technology. For instance in a letter to Nehru he says: *'I want to say is that the individual person should have control over the things that are necessary for the sustenance of life.'* Collected Works, Volume 81. Dharampal (2003) sums up Gandhiji's views on technology as follows: *'Gandhiji had definite views about the desirable society and the norms within which it should function. Technology, according to him, should grow out of the requirements of needs of such a society and be fully woven into its social fabric quite in contrast to the way in which modern Western-inspired science and technology are said to be increasingly becoming wholly autonomous, or even said to be taking charge of the running of politics, and thus of societies themselves.'*

of the ethical for the material: In contemporary societies almost all social institutions find their justification in objectives which are predominantly materialistic in nature. From what has been said above it is clear that the successful functioning of these institutions depends on individuals performing their assigned roles. While in certain contexts it will be possible to make individuals perform their assigned roles, even when they have not internalized the idea of doing so, by appropriate incentives and penalties; it would not be possible to do so invariably. Thus, in the absence of internalization of the idea of doing one's duty it would be well-nigh impossible for most institutions to realize the objectives for the attainment of which these institutions supposedly exist. Furthermore, in the absence of commitment to certain fundamental ethical principles it is not clear why an individual will internalize the idea of performing the tasks assigned to him. Thus it seems that even for the purpose of attaining purely materialistic objectives, internalization of fundamental ethical principles by individuals is quite crucial. It is in this context that Gandhi's identification of civilization with ethical conduct becomes comprehensible.¹³

Once it is recognized that it is the realized social objectives, and not the objectives conceived in theory, which play a crucial role in influencing the normative makeup of individuals, the significance of the fundamental ethical principles becomes even more clear. As we have seen above, in the absence of the requisite ethical principles, the outcomes which will generally obtain will be quite different from what they would have been had everyone performed the assigned tasks in the required manner. The divergence between the desired outcomes and actual outcomes, if persistent over a long period, can bring about a complete transformation of one's understanding of the very objectives for the attainment of which the various societal institutions are supposed to exist. Such a transformation in turn can have further negative consequences. As the normative makeup of individuals in general can be expected to be closely related to the institutional structure of the society and their normative implications, non-realization of important values at the social level can only result in the dilution of corresponding and related values in the normative makeup of individuals. This in turn can only aggravate the problem of institutions not delivering the desired outcomes. The dominance of the market in the contemporary context then has the implication that in the context of non-market institutions as well we should expect from most individuals self-regarding behaviour even though the design of these institutions might be such that their successful functioning depended on individuals performing their assigned roles, and not acting in their narrow self-interest.

¹³*'Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means 'good conduct'.'* *Hind Swaraj*, p. 56.

To sum up, Gandhi's critique of modernity is essentially normative. He is critical of modernity because it exalts material comforts in sharp contradistinction with the higher ideals of limitation of wants and non-possession. Furthermore for Gandhi, modern institutions are undesirable on several counts. Modern institutions are so structured that they tend to increase violence and disharmony in the society. Also, they facilitate articulation of undesirable values; and tend to suppress desirable values. Implicit in Hind Swaraj critique is the idea of unsustainable institutional structures; and Gandhian belief that that any institutional structure which gives such a large domain to self-regardingness is bound to be unsustainable.

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