

Towards a Framework for Understanding Gandhiji's Critique of Modernity in *Hind Swaraj*¹

Satish K. Jain

In Gandhiji's own words *Hind Swaraj* "is a severe condemnation of modern civilization".¹ Gandhiji's negative opinion about modern civilization extended to all its aspects. Modern technology, machine being the fundamental constituting unit of it; and Western social institutions, particularly those pertaining to law and medicine, came in for the most severe criticism. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether a unifying framework exists within which Gandhiji's views regarding various aspects of modernity could be understood.

At one level one might think of such an exercise as quite superfluous in view of the facts that on the one hand Gandhiji's commitment to non-violence was of a very high order and on the other he saw embodiment of violence in every feature of modernity. If in the value-system of a person non-violence figures very high and his characterization of a particular social order or civilization is such that violence figures in it in a prominent way then the evaluative judgment of that social order or civilization being unacceptable follows immediately; without any recourse to analysis within a complex framework.

The reason why the above simple and straightforward way of understanding Gandhian rejection of modernity will not do is that regardless of how committed a person might be to a particular value it is inconceivable that a person would not be subscribing to other values. Once there is a multiplicity of values, conflicts of values are almost inevitable. Gandhiji was not only committed to non-violence; he was also committed to truth and other important human values. When two values are in conflict, willingly or unwillingly, the individual must choose. What holds true for an individual holds true for societies and civilizations as well. In Gandhiji's perception Western or modern civilization might have been more violent than pre-British Indian civilization; but the question of Gandhiji thinking of Indian civilization prior to colonization as non-violent does not arise.

¹(Gandhi Marg, Volume 31 Number 2, July-September 2009, pp. 205-212.)

(<http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/satishkjain.htm>)

Once one recognizes that in every social order there is bound to be a multiplicity of values and that it is highly unlikely that any significant value would be entirely absent from any social order, it becomes evident that two social orders cannot be meaningfully compared merely in terms of the presence or absence of this or that value. Real societies differ not so much with respect to presence or absence of significant values as they do with respect to the domains of different values. When different values are in conflict, as mentioned above, individuals and societies must resolve these conflicts in some way. One society might accord to a particular value a large domain of predominance while another society only a relatively small domain. The meta-principle which determines the domain and sub-domain of every value is in a fundamental sense the most important constitutive element of a civilization. It is this meta-principle which determines what is right and what is wrong. From Gandhiji's statement that

Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.²

it appears that Gandhiji's intuitive understanding of what a civilization is mainly about was probably very close to identifying it with the meta-principle determining the domains and sub-domains of values.

If we abstract from the other constitutive features of civilizations and concentrate only on the normative aspects then it is clear that statements regarding superiority or inferiority of a civilization in relation to another civilization are really statements proclaiming superiority or inferiority of the meta-principle embodied in the former civilization in relation to the meta-principle embodied in the latter. When a person belongs to or is a product of a particular civilization then it would be well-nigh impossible for him or her not to internalize the meta-principle embodied in that civilization. From the vantage point of the internalized meta-principle any civilization with a radically different meta-principle is bound to be found wanting. Europeans found all non-European civilizations fundamentally flawed. Although there were major non-Indian influences on Gandhiji, there can be little doubt that notwithstanding these influences the cultural-civilizational core of Gandhiji's being was derived essentially from the meta-principle implicit in the Indian society of those days. Someone who had internalized the normative core of the Indian civilizational structure was bound to have the kind of judgment that Gandhiji had regard-

ding the radically different modern civilization.

Although the above way of looking at normative structure of societies does provide an understanding of Gandhiji's critique of modernity, it also trivializes the critique. Given any two different civilizations any one of them would turn out to be superior to the other from its own vantage point. The meaningful comparisons are possible only when there are objective criteria in terms of which the meta-principles themselves could be evaluated. It is argued in what follows that in Gandhiji's writings, particularly in *Hind Swaraj*, there are indications regarding the objective criteria which can be used for evaluating different social arrangements from normative perspective under certain conditions, although not in all instances; and that it is highly likely that while formulating his critique of modernity, Gandhiji had these objective criteria in mind, although in all probability only intuitively.

One important question that one can ask regarding the normative structure of any society is whether it is sustainable.³ Not every value-system is self-sustainable. An example may help illustrate the point. In any society there will be different kinds of institutions performing a myriad of functions. Successful functioning of social institutions requires that individuals operating within the framework of these institutions perform their assigned roles. Consequently, it is very important that individuals internalize the idea of performing their assigned roles. In the absence of such internalization there would emerge a divergence between what is required of individuals for the proper functioning of the institution in question and what the individuals would actually do given their values and preferences. If judges decide cases not on the basis of law and evidence but in a way which would be most conducive to their self-interest then there is practically no possibility of the legal institutions performing as envisaged. Thus, while it would be foolhardy to expect that individuals will never behave in selfish ways, it is also clear that if the self-interest becomes the predominant motive for individual behaviour then in the long-run many institutions, where performing of assigned roles by individuals is crucial for their successful functioning, may become degenerate. Using a somewhat different phraseology, one can say that the social values which will be realized by societal institutions depend to a great extent on individual values. While one can expect that by and large justice will be upheld if judges on the whole decide cases on the basis of law and evidence; the values which will be realized through the legal system will have very little relationship with justice if in the main judges care more about their self-interest than about justice.

The relationship between individual values and social values is not a one-way relationship. As the social values which are realized through the instrumentality of institutions to a great extent depend on individual values; so do individual values depend on what social values are. If certain social values are dominant in the society they are bound to have profound influence on the formation of individual values. As both individual and social values impact on each other the natural and important question arises whether there is any sustainable equilibrium of these values.

From Gandhiji's writings it is abundantly clear that in his opinion the modern civilization placed the idea of bodily comforts on too high a pedestal.⁴ The space that self-interest will occupy in a system where comforts and luxuries are considered not only desirable but the highest achievements of civilization is bound to be rather large. Furthermore, Gandhiji's intuitive understanding of major social institutions planted by the British in India was that they accentuated rather than attenuated the selfish and baser streaks of human beings. He did not mince words when he spoke of lawyers and doctors in *Hind Swaraj*:

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.

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 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.⁵

In the light of the above it seems reasonable to claim that there is an objective criterion which underlies the Gandhian critique of modernity; Gandhiji built his criticism of modernity on the basis of his intuitive understanding that any normative and institutional structure which was as hedonistic as the modernity was fundamentally unsustainable. I think it would not be inappropriate to interpret the following of his remarks in this sense:

Indian civilization is the best and that the European is a nine days' wonder.⁶

This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed.⁷

Although the foregoing analysis provides some understanding of Gandhiji's critique of modernity, it is in some important respects quite incomplete. Gandhiji's anti-technology views, for instance, cannot be explained by the foregoing analysis. A priori there seems to be no reason why meta-normative considerations should have a bearing on one's attitude towards technology.

From a close reading of *Hind Swaraj* it appears to be the case that Gandhiji's anti-technology views emerged essentially from insights that he had regarding modern technology. One insight based on his observations and beliefs related to the unintended consequences of modern technology. Explaining his opposition to railways he says:

It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly we had natural segregation. 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. People become careless and so the pressure of famine increases. Railways accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy. Formerly, people went to these places with very great difficulty. Generally, therefore, only the real devotees visited such places. Nowadays rogues visit them in order to practise their roguery.⁸

Although I have not been able to find anything in *Hind Swaraj* to substantiate it, it is probable that at an intuitive level Gandhiji perceived some kind of organic relationship between technology and values. For the purpose of linking Gandhiji's views regarding technology with the meta-normative considerations it would suffice if it is accepted that given a particular technological structure not every value-system can be supported by it; and given a value-system not every technology can coexist with it. Given this kind of organic relationship between technology and values, one is bound to take an anti-modern technology stand if one comes to believe that the value-system that one would like to have in the society cannot co-exist with it.

Gandhiji was also aware of an organic relationship between technology and the products which become possible because of it. From this perspective also he, unlike most of his contemporaries, was not enamoured of modern technology. Writing in *Harijan* on the issue of polished versus unpolished rice he says:

In my writing on cent per cent swadeshi, I have shown how some aspects of it can be tackled immediately with benefit to the starving millions both economically and hygienically. The richest in the land can share the benefit. Thus if rice can be pounded in the villages after the old fashion, the wages will fill the pockets of the rice-pounding sisters and the rice-eating millions will get some sustenance from the unpolished rice instead of pure starch which the polished rice provides. Human greed, which takes no count of the health or the wealth of the people who come under its heels, is responsible for the hideous rice-mills one sees in all the rice-producing tracts. If public opinion was strong, it would make rice-mills an impossibility by simply insisting on unpolished rice and appealing to the owners of rice-mills to stop a traffic that undermines the health of a whole nation and robs the poor people of an honest means of livelihood. But who will listen to the testimony of a mere layman on the question of food values? I, therefore, give below an extract from *The Newer Knowledge of Nutrition* by Mr. Collum and Simmonds which a medical friend, to whom I had appealed for help, has sent with his approbation.⁹

In *Hind Swaraj* he says:

Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so.¹⁰

If one accepts the foregoing way of interpreting the Gandhian critique of modernity then a substantial part of *Hind Swaraj* can be understood in a unified framework. In *Hind Swaraj* in several places Gandhiji argues in terms of some absolute principle or the other, but then elsewhere in a different context he would not apply that principle in an absolute way. Take for instance the following passage regarding doctors:

Doctors have almost unhinged us. Sometimes I think that quacks are better than highly qualified doctors. Let us consider: the business of a doctor is to take care of the body, or, properly speaking, not even that. Their business is really to rid the body of diseases that may afflict it. How do these diseases arise? Surely by our

negligence or indulgence. I overeat, I have indigestion. I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured. I overeat again, I take his pills again. Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishments deserved by me and I would not have overeaten again. The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. My body thereby certainly felt more at ease; but my mind became weakened. A continuance of a course of medicine must, therefore, result in loss of control over the mind.¹¹

Here Gandhiji is spelling out an argument which is against all medicine, not merely modern medicine. The existence of medicine will almost surely lead to self-indulgence with its inevitable consequences. Similarly, in the passage quoted earlier regarding lawyers there appears to be an argument which is applicable to the institution of lawyers generally. But in *Hind Swaraj* he says:

This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds.¹²

The only way that these statements can be reconciled is by invoking the idea of a meta-normative principle which will determine the domains and sub-domains of values; and by postulating that the Gandhian critique of modernity is not so much about the presence or absence of this or that value but pertains to the rejection of the meta-normative principle embodied in the modern civilization.

To sum up: Gandhiji saw values interwoven in every feature of the society, whether it was technology, institutions or the consumption pattern. For Gandhiji, the normative structure of the society was of paramount importance. He was critical of everything which he thought might be inimical to the value-system which he believed in and considered superior to other value-systems. In all likelihood his opposition to modern technology stemmed from his intuitive feeling that the value-system that he believed in was not compatible with modern technology. His disapproval of most Western institutions also had its roots in his understanding that the nature of these institutions was such that they were bound to lead to a value-system which was inconsistent with the value system he found appropriate. His critique of modernity is non-trivial as implicit in it is the idea of non-sustainability of a social order which places hedonistic values on the highest pedestal. In according centrality to the normative structure of the society Gandhiji stands apart from his contemporaries who accorded centrality to science or science-based technology.

Notes and References

1. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule or Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), Translation of ‘Hind Swaraj’, published in the Gujarat columns of Indian Opinion, 11th and 18th December, 1909; Published by Yann FORGET on 20th July 2003, with LATEX 2_ε (Hereinafter referred to as *Hind Swaraj*); p. 15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

3. One could also ask questions regarding other kinds of sustainabilities, the ecological sustainability being one of the most important. If a society is ecologically unsustainable then it must necessarily be normatively unsustainable. The converse, however, need not hold. Similar entailment relations hold between normative sustainability and other kinds of sustainabilities. Thus the normative sustainability, the focus of discussion here, guarantees other kinds of sustainabilities.

4. Speaking of modern civilization Gandhiji says (*Hind Swaraj*, p. 29):

Let us first consider what state of things is described by the word ‘civilization’. Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life.

5. *Hind Swaraj*, p. 41.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

9. Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Polished v. Unpolished”, *Harijan*, October 26, 1934.

10. *Hind Swaraj*, p. 30.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.