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Gandhi's Hind Swaraj: A resistance against west

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had always envisioned an Independent India which is free from the British Raj not just politically, but also sociologically, culturally and ideologically from the influence of the west. In his book *Hind Swaraj* he explicates his understanding of "Swaraj", "Modern Civilization" and the nature of the increasingly "mechanical world". His views often seem to be "Anti-modern" in nature. However, in this paper an attempt has been made to show how on the contrary Gandhi's views can be read as "Modern" and very much relevant to the times he lived. His vision of an "Alternate worldview" free from western influence can be read as "modern" and "novel" in its own right.

Keywords: Gandhi's hind swaraj independent india

Introduction

In this paper I have tried to look at Gandhi's "Anti-Modern" ideas in his book, *Hind Swaraj* as one of the greatest resistance by the east against the west. I have also tried to show how Gandhi's thoughts in *Hind Swaraj* are modern. Apart from this I have tried to put forward the relevance of Gandhi's "Anti-Modern" stance in *Hind Swaraj*, in today's world.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1908 and published it in the year 1909. He wrote this book at a time when the entire country was trying to resist and was under agitation against the British who ruled over us.

Gandhi, conceptualised his own vision of resisting the British. He clearly tried to put forward his ideas of "Swaraj" or home rule before the nation, in *Hind Swaraj*. Although this book was written with the aim of an anti-British agenda and the ways to achieve home-rule or "Swaraj", it can be considered as an alternative option of living. I wish to explore these "alternate" modern ideas of Gandhi and critically place its relevance in the present day world.

It is important to keep in mind, that Gandhi's critique of the west comes as a result of his strategy to make the people of India aware of their great ancient past and revive their self-confidence and fight against anything that was western in nature. He criticises the modern western civilization in the light of gaining freedom from the Britishers. Also it is to be noted that the concept of "modern" is given to us by the west. Gandhi talks about not only an 'alternative' kind of modernity which he conceives but also imbibes the western concept of modern.

Gandhi is often accused of being a "traditionalist" for his "anti-modern" ideas in *Hind Swaraj*. But I think it is important to understand what kind of modernity Gandhi was advocating against. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi refuses to accept the modern culture of the west. He says that the culture of the west was a materialistic culture who gave more importance to materials rather than values like morality, truth, ethics etc. He therefore rejects the modern western civilization on the basis of its alien culture

which is unsuitable in Indian context. This is because Indian civilization is totally different from the western civilization and according to him, superior to the west in terms of spirituality and human values.

Partha Mukherjee in his essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's question" mentions that "the nationalist employed Ideological principle of "selection" rather than complete dismissal of modernity". He talks on, how the nationalist leaders including Gandhi were actually trying to select the best of the west and leaving the rest.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi advocates that we cannot completely reject everything that comes from the west. But we must take the best from the west and reject the unessential. Further what makes Gandhi's thoughts modern according to me, is that, his ideas were very futuristic

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in nature. For example- Gandhi's view of using indigenous ways of living and rejection of excessive industrialisation was on the basis that man might become disillusioned if he over-indulges in machines. He says that machine has the power to make man even forget the values of humanity.

He mentions in *Hind Swaraj* that we can hope for total freedom only when we are able to reject machines completely. It is another matter whether we have been able to reject the machines or not, but what is important is he could indeed foresee the future. We are in many ways slaves to machines in present times.

Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* questions the modern western civilization. He asks vital questions like—if living in better homes, or inventing the fastest train, or producing weapons which could kill many by a single man etc, can be called a civilization?

He therefore questions the material aspect of the modern western civilization. According to him civilization means something very different. It is not mere material development but a sense that will direct him towards the path of righteousness. He adds that the modern western civilization is very corrupted in the sense that it is divorced from human values. He therefore strikes at the very core or essence of the western civilization.

Gandhi further criticises various institutions of the west and argues how the west is “not worth copying”. He attacks various institutions of the west like the Parliament, Railways, Education system, lawyers, doctors etc. He says that the English parliamentary system is like a “prostitute”. He says that contrary to popular beliefs of parliament being an institution which works smoothly and effectively. He says that it is not so in reality. It in fact works on the basis of fear. The parliament is constantly used by the prime ministers as a platform to further his or her own needs rather than the welfare of others. He says that the electors who are considered to be educated are actually hypocrites who work only for their own interest.

He further criticizes the railways because according to him it has increased the pace of life, which ultimately has a corrupting effect. He says it is because of the railways that the British has been able to hold a firm hold over all parts of India. He says that it has also lead to the increase in crime.

He also criticises the professions of lawyers and doctors. He tells that it is the presence of lawyers who has lead the country to it's ruins. This is because it is a profession which teaches immorality and which has tightened the English hold over India. Further he adds that the doctors instead of curing the disease should care for health. He says that the British clearly uses the medical profession to hold us back.

Therefore by pointing out the hollowness and the artificiality of the western institutions he clearly refutes their system of conduct. His arguments also makes us aware of the ways of dominion that the west employed over the east. Gandhi's attack of the western hegemonic institutions are also an area of study that the post-colonial writers in today's world. It also educates us to the politics of the western domination and opens our minds to be critical of the institutions of the west and not accept everything blindly. For example –in today's world where institutions like the UNO, Unicif, World Bank etc. are considered as welfare institutions which work for the good of the world, they are in fact puppets under the hands of the current super power United States, who manipulates its working according to its own conveniences. Thus I think that if we look into the institutions of western domination, Gandhi's views in *Hind Swaraj* are very much relevant in understanding today's world.

Further, Gandhi gave out a novel concept of religion called “Dayadharmā” meaning a new form of religion which was based on love, respect and acceptance of the other. It can be conceptualised as a religion of ‘love’ which is common in every religion and thus could be said as ‘the religion of religions’.

I believe that in the present world where so much conflicts have risen because of religion for example, the Gujarat riot, Ayodhya issue etc. The secular concept of religion as given out by Gandhi can be considered as an alternative for those people who wish to be secular. Gandhi's concept of Dayadharmā can also be seen as a critique of the west which tried to convert the native Indians into Christianity. Thus his concept of religion can also be considered ‘modern’ in the present world because it is secular in nature.

Further Gandhi gives out the concept of ‘Sarvodaya’ meaning “welfare of all” in *Hind Swaraj*. He tells that it is essential that Indians adopt it as a part of their behaviour. This again, I think proves to be a severe critique of the capitalistic economy of the west which works on the division between the workers and factory owner. Also the idea of “welfare of all” is a democratic concept of equality and thereby a modern idea as well.

One of the greatest resistance that Gandhi put against the modern western civilization for gaining home rule was the use of “swadeshi” or indigenous goods. By emphasising the use of “indigenous”, he meant it in terms of every aspect of life. He tried to revive the ancient knowledge system, the Indian medical system, khadi and many other indigenous ideas. Gandhi gave importance to the concept of human labour as opposed to machine culture. Although he did not totally reject the use of machines, he said that we should avoid its use as much as we can and put emphasis on the use of indigenous goods which is easily available and less costly. He emphasised the ideal of simple living and high thinking. This I think is a very modern idea in the sense that it can be adopted by anyone and used to pursue other important things in life in terms of one's priorities.

By thinking on the context of pre-independent India when Gandhi gave out this idea, I believe that it as a modern practise in the sense that it was an attempt to find a way of using less of the machines and thereby adopting eco-friendly processes. It could also be conceptualised as an “alternative modernity”, a means of figuring out a novel and alternative way of living, different from the modern western concept of modernity which emphasised only on machines and a capitalistic culture. Thus by rejecting the western materialistic culture and even machines to a great extend Gandhi was putting forward a very powerful critique of the modern western civilization.

In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi was of the opinion that English education was both a necessity and a bane. He cites the example of the English chancellor, Mr Lloyd George's efforts in reviving welsh language by leading a movement where they could make the welsh children speak in Welsh. He says that even though we cannot do without English education, yet we must try to converse in our mother tongue and preserve our language. He adds that if we can revive our language only then we get rid of the English language and eventually get rid of being slaves under the west.

Gandhi's understanding of the power of the coloniser's language can also be applied to the present day post-colonial studies where we see how the imperialist worldviews continues to persists through the medium of language and how the imposition of the western cultural hegemony over the colonised subjects continues.

Thus his ideas of getting rid of the colonial English language, although can be viewed as problematic, can be considered as a great critique against the western hegemony. In conclusion, I want to highlight the fact that the ideas presented by Gandhi, in his book *Hind Swaraj*, possesses a severe critique of the modern western civilization. Besides this Gandhi's "anti-modern" stance which is popularly criticised as traditional are, in fact very modern. Apart from this, even though his ideas may seem very utopic and unusable in the sense that we cannot go back to the past and revive an ancient mode of living, they give us modern alternatives to the current world of excessive industrialisation and which is causing irreparable damage to the nature. Last but not the least I have tried to show how Gandhi's ideas in *Hind Swaraj* are still relevant and can be used to understand the present day world and even can be selectively applied in our everyday lived world.

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