

## **The Relevance of Gandhian Modernity in the Contemporary Era**

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“If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable.  
 He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision  
 of humanity evolving towards a world of peace and  
 harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk”.

- Martin Luther King, Jr. The words of Martin Luther  
 King, Jr.  
 (New York: New Market Press, 1983: 71)

*The article is an attempt to focus on the thoughts and practices of Mahatma Gandhi which has deeply embedded notion of modernity inherent in it. An analysis of his thoughts deciphers that he was so farsighted that he has foreseen the future of the world well in advance and accordingly advocated his ideas, which was in tune with the egalitarian concept of equality, liberty and fraternity that sought for eternal world peace. For him, dignity of the individual and especially of the commoners was of prime importance and for that he denounced the imperialist notion of big industries and politics based on power play. Gandhi was against such modernization which was imported from west. He was critical to big industries, machineries etc. which brought the alienated mankind to the condition of mere consumer. It breeds the seeds of inequality, oppression, unemployment and consequently loss of self-pride according to him. He believed in such a world which truly lies on universal peace, brotherhood and humanity wherein peace, love, harmony with nature, village based economy, secularization of thought, democratic political participation and decision making, decentralization of power etc. are the prime axis of the societal governance. His thought and practices were of so power and vigour that it still appeals to the whole world and thus being practiced globally to maintain universal peace. Thus, from this perspective, he was exceptionally modernist from any other modern thinker because he visualized the mantras of peaceful co-existence of human beings at such a time when the whole world was burning under the fire of hatred and war.*

**[Key Words:** *Modernity, Peace, Humanity, Religion, Politics, Ecology and Environment*]

“Of all the great figures of the twentieth century, Gandhi has perhaps best stood the test of time. In the aftermath of a century of unprecedented mass violence, many see in the apostle of non-violence the prophet of the only possible future for mankind, a future without hatred, greed and lust for power”.

(Markovits 2003: 1) “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was called ‘Mahatma’ because of his extraordinary achievements as leader of the Indian movement for independence. Gandhi was not primarily a theorist but a reformer and activist”. (Dalton 1998: 1) “His claim to uniqueness rests both on the originality of his thought and even more on his uncanny ability to put his theory into practice. Because key ideas like freedom and power so concerned him, the creative ways that he translated them into action remain exciting today”. (ibid:9) Gandhian contribution to humanity becomes more important and relevant in the light of the fact that his thoughts and practices, which seemed awkward and unconventional and raised eyebrows of many critique during his lifetime, has converted into remarkably most sought after practices and habits of people and society in the contemporary times. Today, most of the debates and discussions on sustainable development, environmental protection and ecological resilience keep at center stage, the Gandhian notion of modernity which advocated for balance between technology, ecology and environment.

Gandhian modernity developed in reaction to the colonial policy of plunder, not only in terms of exploitation of the natural resources but as well as its natives, which culminated in the era between two world wars. With the outbreak of First World War, the whole world in general and India in particular faced the “fretful arms race, the problems of rising population and resource depletion, the growing menace of ecological disaster, increasing misery of poverty, religious fundamentalism and intra-state and inter-state violence. They were the by-products of the age of technology and industrialism, which took mankind to a state of crisis.” (Pattnaik 1996: 40) Gandhi was well aware of the problems, which pre-occupied the world on the name of development. He has foreseen the future of the world, if the same trends of hegemonic domination and subordination of the people over masses take place on a continuous period of time. It is in this background Mahatma Gandhi wrote his ‘Hind Swaraj’ in 1909 and ‘Young India’ in 1921. “Gandhiji explains ‘Hind Swaraj’ by saying: “It is a book which can be put into the hands of a child. It teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It puts soul-force against brute-force ..... The booklet is a severe condemnation of modern civilization”.

In this backdrop, the aim of the paper is to explain and understand the genius of Gandhi’s work, which suddenly changed the fate of India and attracted the attention worldwide. We have to analyze and evaluate the theories and opinions, which Gandhi delivered regarding the humanity of mankind. Simultaneously, the paper will try to focus on the relevance of Gandhian thought and views in today’s context. Can he be really called as modernist? In other words, whether Gandhian model of thought is still prevalent and used in modern world?

### **Attributes and Indicators of Modernization**

Before delving deep into the Gandhian thought, it would be pertinent to bestow basic tenets of modernization. “Modernization is a historical process

initiated in the west". (ibid: 40) "It may be understood as the common behavioral system historically associated with the urban, industrial, literate and participant societies of Western Europe and North America". (Wang 1998: 165) Discourse on modernity says "it is not purely change or mere sequence of events, it means the diffusion of the products of rational activity: scientific, technological and administrative. Instrumental rationality operates within specific types of activity and prevents any sector from being externally organized on the basis of its integration in to a general vision, or its contribution to the realization of what Louis Dumont (*Dumont 1988: 7*) calls a holistic societal project. Modernity precludes all finality. The secularization and disenchantment described by Weber, who defines modernity in terms of intellectualization, marks the necessary break with the finalism of the religious spirit, which always invokes the end of history, meaning the final fulfillment of the divine project or the destruction of a perverted humanity which has betrayed its mission" (Dube 1988: 17).

Yogendra Singh has analyzed (Dube 1988:7) modernization in contrast to tradition. He puts it, "Terms like 'individualism', 'secularism' are often used to oppose modern society to societies of the traditional type. In particular, the contrast between caste society and its modern counterpart is a common place. Liberty and equality on the one hand, interdependence and hierarchy on the other, are in foreground. Permanency versus mobility, ascription versus achievement allow for a neat contrariety between the two kinds of social system." (Singh 1988: 3) The idea of modernity is thus closely associated with rationalization. It makes science, rather than God, central to society and at best relegates religious beliefs to the inner realm of private life. It is the achievement of reason itself, and it is therefore primarily the achievement of science, technology and education. S.C. Dubey expresses similar opinion about modernization. He says, "Modernization is characterized by a rational and scientific world view, growth and the ever increasing application of science and technology, together with the continuous adaptation of the institutions of society to the imperatives of the new world view and emerging technological ethos". (Touraine 1995: 9)

Three assumptions are basic to the concept of modernization: (Dube 1988: 17)

1. Inanimate source of power must be increasingly tapped with a view to solving human problems and ensuring minimum acceptable standards of living.
2. Towards this end, there should be both individual and collective effort. The collective dimension is important because associational capability to operate complex organizations is a pre-requisite of at least the middle and higher reaches of modernization.
3. To create and run complex organizations radical personality change and attendant change in the social structure and values are necessary.

Thus, the complex process of modernization assumes a series of interpenetrating and interdependent transformations. On the level of personality, it envisages promotion of rationality as well as empathy, mobility and high participation. These attributes of a 'modernized' personality are promoted and sustained by structural, institutional, attitudinal and value change on the personal, social and cultural levels. In sociological language, the social and cultural milieu increasingly acquires achievemental, universalistic and specificity-oriented emphasis. Modernized societies accept and produce more innovations, build up associational capability and sharpen problem-solving abilities. To put it simply, modernization according to Dubey rests on three basic characteristics viz. solving of human problems and minimum acceptable standard of living; collective dimension; thirdly and most importantly change of attitude towards social structure and value.

Falling in line with the above argument, "some scholars designed and recommended in the early 1960's numerous blueprints for a 'preferred modernized world order' for the future. Their recommendations were based on five agreed core values: war prevention, peace, poverty eradication, ecological balance and removal of alienation; which they consider to be of fundamental importance for the establishment of a peaceful world order in future". (ibid; 17-18) In another context, the process of modernization is the "achievement to reason itself". (Yadav 1996: 464)

A more contemporary view on modernity has been given by Dipankar Gupta (Touraine 1995: 11) in the Indian context. He says "Modernity has been misrecognised in India because of the tendency to equate it with technology and with other artifacts. The possession of modern technology, however, does not always signal modernity. Modernity has to do with attitudes; especially those that come into play in social relations." A modern society, according to Gupta (Gupta 2000:2), comprises of following characteristics:

- Dignity of the individual;
- Adherence to universalistic norms;
- Elevation of individual achievement over privileges or disprivileges of birth;
- Accountability in public life.

It is apparent from the above discussion that modernity abides by the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity or to put it in another words, the concept of 'Ram Rajya' can be equated with the modern notion of modernity. Infact, it is not a commodified product but a change in perception based on rationality, reason, equity and equality. It is a way of life in terms of characteristics such as prevention of war, establishment of peace, eradication of poverty, minimum acceptable standard of life, ecological balance, removal of alienation, restoration of dignity of individual, elevation of individual achievement, accountability in public life; or in a nutshell, solving the basic problems which the humanity is facing in today's world. These parameters of

modernity will help us evaluate the Gandhian thought. Following passages will analyze and evaluate the Gandhian notion of modernity.

### **The Notion of World from Gandhian Perspective**

Before a conceptual analysis of Gandhian world order, it must be made explicit at the outset that Gandhi never presented at one place or time, a systematic model of modernized world. Rather it was during his involvement in South Africa, struggle for Indian freedom and concerns for finding means to solve the problems of war, he expressed his views and opinions through writings and speeches, on which his model of a modernized world could be developed. Since Gandhian thought touched upon various facet of life, we will try to examine each one of them separately for the convenience of analysis.

#### **A. On Politics**

Gandhian vision of Politics is based on the principles of ‘Satyagraha’ and those who exercise political authority will have only one maxim to follow, i.e., humble and unstinted service. “The aim of the application of Gandhian ‘Sarvodaya’ perspective is not to achieve victory over other but over the current dismal scenario of mutual distrust and fear and, extension of the principle of peace, love and harmony between every one and also between countries”. (Gupta 2000: 2) When politics undergoes this transformation, democracy will become intensely participatory in all respects. Power games will disappear and only healthy competition will survive. Religious principles will guide political activities without inviting communal feeling. Gandhi said, “My Politics and all my activities are derived from my religion”. Gandhian notion of Politics assumes a clear means to Satyagraha: the quintessential truth and non-violence to which man is oriented. Gandhi sees morality and politics as the sides of the same coin and asked for a harmonious relationship between the two. He called, “Parliament ‘a sterile women and a prostitute’, the first because, despite being a sovereign institution, it can’t enact a law according to its own judgment but is constantly swayed by outside pressure, and the second because it continually shifts its allegiance from one set of ministers to another depending on which is more powerful. Basically, Gandhiji objects to an entire structure of politics and government in which each individual is assumed to have his own individual interest.” (Chatterjee 1996: 90) For him, modernization and development essentially requires politics based on morality and Sarvodaya and Satyagraha as the basic ingredient to it.

#### **B. Religious Views**

Only harmony among world religions can bring about a modernized world. This is the Gandhian concept of secularization in which the spirit of truth will move to supreme realization. Truth in the Gandhian sense can’t and will not fail. The ultimate success of the Gandhian spirit of truth will bring about harmony among the world religions at large and in the hearts and minds of human persons in particular. Bhikhu Parekh (Pattnaik 1996: 41), renowned social scientist says, “Gandhi’s religious thoughts revolve around his deep faith in the existence of god and his belief in the mysterious force. To Gandhi, God

was a source of life and light. In his domain everyone had frank and fearless right of expression and mode of living and worship.” “Sarv-dharma Sambhava was his main ideal”. (Parekh 1997) Gandhi secularized Hinduism as much as it was possible to do within a spiritual framework. “Gandhian perspective says that secularism has run into difficulties in India because the modern state is too much with us and intrudes into areas of life where it has no business even to peep. Talking with a Christian missionary in September 1946 Gandhi said, ‘If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it’.” (Madan 1997: 236-37) “On the caste system, he said, ‘caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I don’t know and don’t need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth’.” (Chatterjee 1996: 95)

### **C. Vision of Peace**

Individual is basically good by nature. Due to goodness of his character, he is responsive to the love and affection of his fellow-beings. According to him; “love is the law of life. He knew that only inner goodness of man is not sufficient to bring about peace. To him, man is activated in the pursuit of ‘Truth’, because it is only through truthful means that the goal of peace can be achieved. This transformation could be brought about through self-discipline and by using the technique of non-violence for the resolution of conflicts”. (Pattnaik 1996: 42) “He advocated Peace but not at any price. He wrote, ‘Peace must be just’. Only non-violence and non-violence alone could ensure lasting peace. Once in ‘Harijan’, he said, “not to believe in the possibility of permanent peace is to disbelieve in the godliness of human nature”. (Yadav 1996: 465-66) “He made Sevadharma its very essence. It was indifferent to the struggle for justice and equality; he insisted that this was the only path to moksha in the modern politics dominated age.” (Parekh 1989: 11) “In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi dismissed all historical objections to his project of freeing India, not by the strength of arms but by the force of soul by saying ‘To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man’.” (Chatterjee 1996: 93) Thus, Gandhian notion of peace emanated from harmonious relationship between human beings and their peaceful co-existence with the use of truthful means.

### **D. On Economy**

“Gandhian economic order was based on the decentralization of resources and capital through small-scale industries and self-sufficiency of village economy. Simultaneously he advanced the concept of trusteeship where individual manage and hold properties as trustees of the community and not for their own benefit”. (Pattnaik 1996: 40) His economic system is rooted in a universal cost-reduced mode of living, shedding all unwarranted luxuries and paving the way for a decent survival and living for the other members of the community and society. He was against the industrial production as a craving for excessive consumption. He says, “The mind is a restless bird; the more it

gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passion, the more unbridled they become. Therefore set a limit to our indulgence.” (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*: 37) Gandhi was in favor of transformation of socio-economic structures in a manner, which would lead, in the long run, egalitarian society based on co-operation, independence, and capacity for service among individuals. Gandhi says, “Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villages as the problems of marketing comes in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use.” (Chatterjee 1996: 88) “In opposition to the economic theory, he boldly set up the theory of *aparigraha* (non-possession, non-acquisitiveness) and the minimization of wants. It emphasizes on the present and thus undermines a capitalist as well as state planned socialist production system.” (Saran 1998: 209) Gandhi’s economic vision thus envisages a cost reduced mode of living to pave the way for the progress of the other members of the community.

### **E. Educational Perspective**

Advocated such education that affect and change the lives of the millions of down-trodden rather than a few who would take undue advantage of it. According to him, “Education should cater to the development of the whole man: body, mind, spirit. Educational efforts should epitomize the development of the complete man – the God- oriented man. It should prove to be the best vehicle for the upliftment of the masses in India. Education does not merely improve living conditions. It has goals that transcend immediate considerations of all kinds and leads us right up to the ultimate vision of divine. It is the medium to reach to divine soul: ‘Experience of the soul is the richest and the only one that helps our development’.” (Yadav 1996: 467) Thus, the Gandhian view on education envisaged egalitarian society based on education for all. For him, education was not just a method of getting jobs; rather it was a journey to reach to the divine soul. According to him, only divine soul can be able to understand the needs of the masses and try to fulfill their demands.

### **F. Science and Technology**

All scientific and technological developments are meant to serve man’s progress in desirable directions. If it does not do so, then Gandhi would not hesitate to come forward and call such development total nonsense. “The development of science and technology enable man to produce more and more things on a large scale. Large-scale production necessitates industrialization. Industrialization promotes mass production rather than promotion by masses.” (Mukalel 1990: 339-40) “Gandhi attacks the very notion of modernity and progress and subverts the central claim made on behalf of those notions, viz. their correspondence with a new organization of society in which the productive capacities of human labor are multiplied several times, creating increased wealth and prosperity for all and hence increased leisure, comfort, health and happiness. Gandhi argues that far from achieving those objectives, what modern civilization does is make man prisoner of his craving for luxury and self-

indulgence, release the forces of unbridled competition and thereby bring upon society the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering. It is precisely because modern civilization looks at man as a limitless consumer and thus sets out to open the floodgate of industrial production that it also becomes the source of inequality, oppression and violence on a scale hitherto unknown to human history.” (Chatterjee 1996: 86)

Gandhi opposed big machines and industrialization. The Gandhian vision of technology does not lead man from luxury and sophistication to a level of super sophistication. He emphasized on a ‘need reduced life’ within the framework of a cost reduced economy. He opposed to big machines and symbolized ‘Charkha’ as the prime mode of technology. To him big plants and computers are inevitable, but it does not mean that it is essential and we can’t live without that. Computer can do all jobs, but it will reduce man to a level of non-existing entity. It will commodify everything. Man will loose jobs to computers and technology. Machinery, for Gandhi, instead of increasing the productivity of labor, brings exploitation and disease to the industrial cities and consequently unemployment and ruin to the countryside. Man gets happiness and pleasure while doing creative work. But working on machines will lead them to the stature of Robots where all his creativity will be lost and thus become ‘One Dimensional Man’ as envisioned by Herbert Marcuse. When he is just reduced to be a log in the machine, man finds all his self-importance, dignity and indispensability robbed. Daniel Bell in his book, ‘Coming of the Post Industrial Society,’ visualized this problem of humankind. Similarly, he was quite critical to the modern science of medicine. He writes, “I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to the doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured. I over eat again, I take his pills again. Had I not taken his pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishment deserved by me and I would not have overeaten again.” (Gandhi, Hind Swaraj: 35) He opines modern medicine deviated man away from self-introspection and self-regulatory method.

### **G. Vision of Ecology**

“The publication of a book by Ernst Schumacher in 1973, refocused attention on the idea of ‘appropriate technology’ which was already present in an embryonic state in Gandhi’s programme for the development of village industries. There developed, a new reading of Gandhi as an ‘ecological’ thinker, culminating in 1987 with the well-known report of the Bruntland Commission on the Future of Mankind, which openly acknowledged its Gandhian inspiration. In India, the ecological movements which developed in the wake of the 1973 ‘Chipko Andolan’ agitation for the safeguard of Himalayan forests also involved Gandhi’s name.” (Pattnaik 1996: 42) Gandhi’s ‘Hind Swaraj’ discussed the bad effects of mechanization and industrialization. He says, “It is possible to have technologies that are in ‘tune’ with nature and thus consequences on enhancement of the ecological balance on the earth.” (Markovits 2003: 71) Ramchandra Guha, (Pattnaik 1996: 41) the environmentalist, extensively focused in his work on the complexity of

relationship between Indian ecological movements and Gandhi at the level of the methods of struggle. Most ecological movements tried to use methods of non-violent mass resistance to achieve their objectives, with varying degree of success.

### **Rethinking Modernity from Gandhian Perspective**

In a close scrutiny of Gandhian biography we find that, “he was intensively active, morally restless, a tireless fighter and passionately involved in the world affairs.” (Parekh 1989: 12) In Gandhian perspective, we find the idea of pessimism towards the existing social, economic and political realities of the time. In fact, Gandhi was critique of the entire edifice of bourgeois society; its continually expanding and prosperous economic life based on individual property, the social division of labor and the impersonal laws of the market; its political institution based on a dual notion of sovereignty in which the people in theory rule themselves, but are only allowed to do so through their representatives. He realized that everything is not fine and if the same situation persists for a long time, humanity will be in danger. Gandhi saw the First World War, which almost brought universal catastrophe.

In Gandhian Vision, “contemporary world has lost sight of the fundamental purpose of human existence and we are vanished in several superfluous and immediate goals with the result that we have been struck with and lost in the worlds of our immediate preoccupations and concerns. Consequently our economic, political and social concerns have become ends in themselves with no scope left for us to supersede these and get beyond their dangerously limited horizons.” (Guha 2001) Gandhiji adept his thought in his lifetime itself. From his perspective, “for centuries Hindus had lived with the evil practice of untouchability; he declared war on it and shook its moral roots. Traditionally women had occupied a low position in India; he not only brought a large number of them into public life, which neither Lenin nor Mao could do. The upper strata of Indian society had treated the peasant with scorn; Gandhi placed him at the very center of the political stage and gave him unprecedented political and cultural presence.” (Parekh 1989: 11-12)

Gandhi realized the dangers of civilization and challenged the very notion of power politics. For him, politics was like a demon, which establishes hegemonic relationship in the society. He asked for world peace in the form of non-violence. He aspired for mutual co-existence of people amidst peaceful atmosphere. “Gandhi changed the nature of Indian politics by spiritualizing it. He stood for substitution of power politics by goodness politics. Accordingly, he advocated a socio-economic order and a political system based on the traditional virtues: Satya (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), Aparigraha (non-possession), Asteya (non-covetousness) and Brahmacharya (self control of senses especially in young age) (Saran 1998: 203). “He instructed a generation that non-violent resistance was a transforming and agentic force rather than a passive tactic of the weak. He depicted truth as a goal and compared it to a

diamond whose many facets exposed a variety of meanings.” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: viii)

He was against mechanization and industrialization, which was against sustainable development and triggers ecological and environmental problems. Gandhian vision of technology was in tune with the nature. Instead of industrialization, Gandhi advocated for village-based industries by tapping rural resources to solve the problem of poverty and unemployment. Both small scale and large-scale industries had equal place in Gandhian ‘new economic order’. He was against the mad craze for modern large-scale machinery, not machinery as such. He wanted the concentration of wealth not in the hands of a few but in the hands of all. “Gandhi made ‘wiping away every tear from every eye’ the central test of morality.” (Parekh 1989: 12)

Gandhi advocated ‘Sarv-dharma Sambhava’ as the only alternative before a deeply troubled humanity. He was a strong advocate of gospel of love, honoring all religions and getting rid of communal hatred. On the ecological front, he was well aware of the sane of technology, industrialization and pollution. Because of his quick anticipation of the future catastrophe, he asked for co-operation rather than confrontation with nature. His mantras for industries were keeping the technology to be in tune with nature.

### **Conclusion**

Above discussion bare all facets of modernity in the thought and action of Mahatma Gandhi, be it social, economic, political, religious, ecological or environmental. He has foreseen the future well in advance and accordingly advocated his thought, which was in tune with the egalitarian concept of equality, liberty and fraternity and sought world peace. For him, dignity of individual human being and especially the masses were of prime importance and for that he denounced the imperialist notion of big industries and politics based on power play. Gandhi was against such modernization, which was imported from west. He was critical to big industries, machineries etc. which brought the alienated mankind to the condition of mere consumer. It breeds the seeds of inequality, oppression, unemployment and consequently loss of self-pride. In his words, “It was a moral failure on the part of the Indians that led to the conquest of India. For Gandhi, it is precisely because Indians were seduced by the glitter of modern civilization that they became a subject people.” (Chatterjee 1996: 86) Peace, love, harmony with nature, village based economy, secularization of thought etc. are all gospel of modern era, which was very much central to the thought of Mahatma Gandhi. To conclude, we can readily admit that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the whole world is searching for peace and harmony, Gandhian perspective emerge as a central theme of thought. He was exceptionally modernist from any other modern thought because he visualized the mantras of peaceful co-existence of human beings at such a time when the whole world was burning under the fire of hatred and war.

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