

MAHATMA GANDHI'S CRITICISM OF MODERN CIVILISATION

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Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts seem to be attracting more and more attention nowadays, as the domination among nations and the destruction of the environment are globally questioned. I have once tried to prove that his "theory of trusteeship" was not such a concept supporting the existing regime, as often negatively described, but one pursuing socio-economic transformation in the form of non-violence. However, I was not able to cover in the above paper the whole picture of Gandhi's socio-economic thoughts-including his criticism of modern civilisation, economics and Marxism, and his ideas of *swaraj* and village economy.

Re-examination of Gandhi's philosophy will show how Gandhi opposed Western economics and Marxism in many ways and how he created a foundation for the developmental thoughts and practices of Schumacher and his followers called, "The Other Economic Summit". In this chapter, therefore, I first describe Gandhi's criticism of modern civilisation that of economics and that of Marxist socialism and communism and would explain what socio-economic framework he thought India should pursue. Finally looking at the socio-economically sound village that he envisioned with his trusteeship theory and would like to make it clear that his philosophy was aiming at an alternative development, which was totally different from the *laissez-faire* economics or Marxism.

Criticism of Modern Civilisation :

Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule* was first written in 1909. In the midst of that year he was leading the *Satyagraha* movement in South Africa, demanding the government terminate its discriminatory policies against Indian people there. In its fifth edition published in 1922, he said, "This booklet is a severe condemnation of 'modern civilisation'", implying that the whole structure of his socio-economic philosophy is based on a spirit critical of modern civilisation. "It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down not under the English heel but under that of modern civilisation".

Looking at capitalism developed in the Western world since the era of the industrial revolution, Gandhi found materialism to be the main characteristic of modern civilisation, in which spirituality seemed to be undervalued. That is, "The people of Europe to-day live in better-built houses than they did a hundred years ago. This is considered an emblem of civilisation". "Now they (men) are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy"; and "This civilisation takes note neither of morality nor of religion".

In his speech at Muir Central College in 1916, Gandhi extended this understanding and made clear the difference between "economic progress" and "real progress" saying, "By economic progress, I take it, we mean material advancement without limit, and by real progress we mean moral progress.... I hold that economic progress in the sense ! I have put it is antagonistic to real progress". At the root of this idea there is a strict Hindu ethic of asceticism called *brahmacharya*. Gandhi believed, "Civilisation, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants".

As a result of the industrialism, Gandhi thought, a series of imperialist domination by the Western powers had destroyed the organic structure of non-Western societies since the later half of the eighteenth century. "It is machinery that has impoverished India. It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared".

Criticism of Economics:

Gandhi thus detested material development of society based on people's "greed", which makes his view look radically different from those of Western economists, affirming the pursuit of self-interest. Let us look in his section at how western economics looked to Gandhi's eyes. In *Young India* of 27 October 1921, to a question, "It the economic law that man must buy in the best and cheapest market wrong?" Gandhi answered, "It is one of the most inhuman among the maxims laid down by modern economics".

Adam Smith imagined "a country which had acquired that full complement of riches

which the nature of its soil and climate, and its situation with respect to other countries, allowed it to acquire" as the final stage of economic development; that is, a country "which could, therefore, advance no further, and which was not going backwards". In such a country "both the wages of labour and the profits of stock would probably be very low". David Ricardo also foresaw a stationary situation of economy resulting from diminishing returns of land cultivation and increases in food prices.

"Those who are intoxicated by modern civilisation are not likely to write against it". "The economics that permits one country to prey upon another is immoral".¹

Criticism of Marxist Socialism and Communism :

Gandhi's view of civilisation gave rise to his criticism of Marxist socialism and communism. With regard to Bolshevism, he wrote in *Young India* in 1928 that "it not only does not preclude the use of force but freely sanctions it for the expropriation of private property and maintaining the collective State ownership of the same".

Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, held a view of India's nation building largely different from that of Gandhi. While the latter, as indicated later, attached importance to manual industries in villages like hand-spinning or hand-weaving, the former advocated large-scale industrialisation of India in a socialist way. "He [Nehru] believes in industrialisation; I have grave doubts about its usefulness for India".

Nehru wrote to Gandhi in October 1945, that "A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment". It is exactly this view of villages that led Nehru to assert large-scale socialist industrialisation for India, which is found similar to Karl Marx's way of looking at Indian village communities as "semi-barbarian, semi-civilized".

Gandhi aimed, in fact, to reconstruct the village commune like the one which existed before the British destroyed its economic base. With respect to India, Marx saw a degradation "in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow",² while Gandhi tried to revive indigenous identity of Indian people by praising myths and religious books of Kanuman and cherishing Sabbala as an animal close to the mankind.

Ideas for a Post-Modern Socio-Economic Construction of India :

Gandhi believed that India's socio-economic construction toward *swaraj*, i.e. political independence or self-government, depended on freeing itself from modern civilisation. "If British rule were replaced tomorrow by Indian rule based on modern methods, India would be no better, except that she would be able to retain some of the money that is drained away to England; but then India would only become a second or fifth nation of Europe or America". Gandhi's socio-economic construction was, needless to say, *swadeshi*, or self-reliance, of which village manufacturing industries like *charkha* and *khadi* have their major places.

Thoughts and Practices of Swadeshi :

Gandhi advocated that, to reconstruct the internal economy as the "strongest bulwark" against economic drain by Britain, India should first cease to be dependent upon foreign cloth. The boycott of foreign cloth was, indeed, resolved at a convention of Indian National Congress, even before Gandhi came back home from South Africa to take the leadership of independent movement in India in 1915. The Calcutta session in 1906 produced resolutions:

- 1) *swaraj*,
- 2) boycott of British products,
- 3) *swadeshi* (or use of Indian products)
- 4) national education.

The resolutions demanded that the general public promote development of indigenous industries even by sacrificing themselves to some extent, and eagerly and endlessly strive to stimulate production of indigenous articles prior to imported products.

In the first non-violent resistance movement led by Gandhi, on the other hand, revival and promotion of *charkha* and *khadi* were thought to be the most important. They were about to be almost driven away by the "machinery of Manchester/" disappearing in the midst of modern civilisation. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography, "I am, therefore, concentrating my attention on the production of *Khadi*. I swear by this form of *Swadeshi*, because through it I can provide work

to the semi-starved, semi-employed women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn and to clothe the people of India with *Khadi* woven out of it".³

Village Economy :

Let us look finally at the ideal image of a village in Gandhi's perception. Gandhi's theory of trusteeship and the *swadeshi* movement were, eventually, trying to achieve a society in which "instead of half a dozen cities of India and Great Britain living on the exploitation and the ruin of the 700,000 villages of India, the latter will be largely self-contained". Although he modified *khadi* as "the sun of the whole industrial solar system", he thought of other products, too, like cotton, sugar, rape and wheat, to be produced under cooperative organisations.

With regard to preventing exploitation of tenants by landlords, Gandhi stated in 1944 that the "closest cooperation amongst the peasants is absolutely necessary". Through the entity called "panchayat," he envisioned tenant farmers organizing unions and striking as a form of non-violent non-cooperation. In addition to the village as a political entity, Gandhi, considering it: sanitation and coziness, described an ideal village as following:

Panchayat means not only a self-governing organisation consisting of democratically selected villagers in a narrow sense, but also the village itself in a broader sense.

An ideal Indian village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation. It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation, built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling the householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a cooperative dairy, primary and secondary schools in which industrial education will be the central factor, and it will have panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and fruit, and its own *khadi*. This is roughly my idea of a model village.

Gandhi set as the final goal of the theory of trusteeship and *swadeshi* movement to construct such cooperative villages. He considered as ideal a simple society staying in nature that is based on its people's spirits of *brahmacharya* and / service, replacing a society supported by urban and large-scale industries driven by material development and self-interest of its people.

Gandhi's idea stands it a clear contrast to such images as Smith's "country which had acquired that full complement of riches" or Marx's "man, the sovereign of nature."⁴ In fact Gandhi, by reconstructing the very village commune destroyed by the British interference, was trying to "radically change much that goes under the name of modern civilization.

Gandhi and Alternative Development Theories:

Technology should go back "to the actual size of man"; his thesis, "Man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful",⁵ comes exactly from this. It is not my task here to describe all of Schumacher's thoughts. Nevertheless, it is revealing to see the great influence that he received from Gandhi when he established his own economic philosophy.

The series of ideas stemming from Gandhi have provided theoretical grounds for hundreds of thousands of grass-root developmental activities all over the world. That is why these are alternative development theories, different from any of those stemming from *laissez-faire* economics or Marxism. It can be questioned as to what extent Gandhian style of development could actually be achieved in our modern global materialist societies.

The solution of economic questions will not be brought about by array of capital against labor, and labor against capital, in strife and conflict, but by the voluntary attitude of goodwill on both sides. Then a real and lasting justness of conditions will be secured. Among the Baha'is there are no extortionate, mercenary and unjust practices, no rebellious demands, no revolutionary uprisings against existing governments. The rich will willingly divide. They will come to this gradually, 'naturally, by their own volition.

Gandhi, explaining the need for laws regulating the flow and distribution of wealth, writes, the flowing of streams is in one respect a perfect image of the action of wealth. Where land falls, the water flows. So wealth must go where it is required. But the disposition and administration of rivers can be altered by human forethought. Whether the stream shall be a curse or a blessing depends upon man's labour and administrating intelligence.

According to the divine law, employees should not be paid merely by wages. Nay, rather

they should be partners in every work. The question of socialisation is very difficult. It will not be solved by strikes for wages. All the governments of the world must be united, and organize an assembly, the members of which shall be elected from the parliaments and the noble ones of the nations. These must plan with wisdom and power, so that neither the capitalists suffer enormous losses, nor the labourers become needy.

In the utmost moderation they should make the law, and then announce to the public that the rights of the working people are to be effectively preserved; also the rights of the capitalists are to be protected. When such a general law is adopted, by the will of both sides, should a strike occurs, all the governments of the world should collectively resist it. Otherwise the work will lead to much destruction, especially in Europe. The owners of properties, mines and factories, should share their incomes with their employees, and give a fairly certain percentage of their profits to their working men, in order that the employees should receive, besides their wages, some of the general income of the factory, so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work.⁶

Conclusion :

That economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values. The extension of the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce. Baha'is believed that justice is vital to society, and it is no mere accident that the supreme ruling body of the Baha'i Faith is named *The Universal House of Justice*. What exactly is justice?

Because of its relevance to today's economic and social problems (and their solution), this question is discussed in *The Prosperity of Humankind*:

Justice is the one power that can translate the dawning consciousness of humanity's oneness into a collective will through which the necessary structures of global community life can be confidently erected. An age that sees the people of the world increasingly gaining access to information of every kind and to a diversity of ideas will find justice asserting itself as the ruling principle of successful social organisation.

At the group level, a concern for justice is the indispensable compass in collective decision making, because it is the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved. Far from encouraging the punitive spirit that has often masqueraded under its name in past ages, justice is the practical expression of awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked.

The implications for social and economic development are profound. Concern for justice protects the task of defining progress from the temptation to sacrifice the well-being of the generality of humankind-and even of the planet itself-to the advantages which technological breakthroughs can make available to privileged minorities

Above all, only development programmes that is perceived as meeting their needs and as being just and equitable in objective can hope to engage the commitment of the masses of humanity, upon whom implementation depends. The relevant human qualities such as honesty, a willingness to work, and a spirit of co-operation are successfully harnessed to the accomplishment of enormously demanding collective goals when every member of society-indeed every component group within society-can trust that they are protected by standards and assured of benefits that apply equally to all.

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