Gandhi’s Model of Civilisation and its Present Relevance
by Raj Narayana Das

Great men are either born great, or achieve greatness. And sometimes it is thrust upon some of them. Where does Gandhi stand in this Shakespearean classification? Certainly Gandhi achieved greatness. But I do not want to lift Gandhi to the level of a deity, nor do I want to use such an expression as Gandhism. That would amount to doing grave injustice to him. Because Gandhi denied that he had established a sect. To quote him, “I have no desire to establish a sect. I am really too ambitious to be satisfied with a sect for following for I represent no new truths. I endeavour to follow and represent truth as I know it. I do claim to throw new light on many an old truth.”

Gandhi brought to the notice of all the sad predicament of the wretchedness of the so-called modern civilisation characterised by the outward progress but inward backwardness. It may seem to be a paradox but there is poverty in affluence. And that poverty in affluence only the sharp insight of Gandhi could clearly discern.

Now, when the whole world is passing through a traumatic period due to the surfeit of material progress, when man’s wisdom is lost in knowledge, when man’s knowledge is lost in information, when man’s life is lost in living, when the

\[ \text{atman} \]

is deep asleep like the proverbial

\[ \text{‘Kumbhakarna’} \]

and

\[ \text{bhoga} \]

has become the quintessence of man’s only goal in life, when we are farther from God and spiritualism and nearer to our ‘

\[ \text{D–Day} \]

’ is it irrelevant to look back with gratitude to the teachings of Gandhi, of whom even the great apostle of science, Einstein, said: “…………… generations to come would scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth”? If the present generation happens to take a re-birth after a few centuries, they will find Gandhi in myth. Our eyes are so myopic, our thoughts so jaundiced that we can neither expect noble deeds, noble thoughts and noble men
nor appreciate these. The shape and form, the shade and colour, the quintessence of Gandhi’s moral and political thought were provided by what he himself called, in Hind Swaraj (1909), a severe condemnation of modern civilisation. Hind Swaraj focused on his ideas of modern civilisation which are more relevant today than these were in 1909. It is a masterpiece. Even Tolstoy recorded in his Diary on April 20, 1910: “Read Gandhi about civilisation, wonderful.” One will be surprised to learn that Gandhi wrote this classic at the age of 25 only, thus, truly symbolising Disraeli’s view that everything that is great is made by the youth. Gandhi brought to the notice of all something which we all know but seldom realise: that despite its dazzling artistic brilliance and fabulous intellectual vitality, its material attractions and madly feverish activity, modern civilisation is a hindrance rather than a help to the needs of the human soul and the craving for a better life. And how true he is today than he was in his own time. Today we pretend to have everything before us, but we have nothing before us except fear. Today we pretend to live in the best of times, but in reality we live in the worst of times. Today we pretend to see the spring of hope all around us, but we are surrounded by the clouds of the winter of despair. Science has made everything too easy. Both birth and death! We can just push the button and remaining far away from our enemy, destroy him in the twinkle of an eye. This is the achievement of the

“pushbutton”

civilisation. Thus Gandhi had a tremendous foresight to suggest that a grim tragedy lies hidden behind all the tinsel splendour of modern civilisation, that the ceaseless rush for mere living leaves no time for contemplation, for self-introspection, that the marvels of science, the claims of civilisation and the gospel of progress offer neither stability nor certainty, nothing substantial to struggling humanity.

Gandhi and Rousseau

In his condemnation of modern civilisation Gandhi appears to be very close to Rousseau’s ideas. At the age of 37, Rousseau participated in an essay competition organised by the Academy of Dijon. The topic of the essay was: “Has progress in science and arts corrupted or purified mankind?” Rousseau wrote that it had corrupted mankind. Gandhi too believed that modern civilisation had corrupted mankind. And how relevant his ideas are today! Each moment of every day we risk the imminent destruction of life in this world! Man, because of the tremendous expansion in science, has made a successful expedition to moon, and at the same time is thinking of taking shelter there and destroy the earth. Science—the embodiment of modern civilisation—is like the Frankenstein monster that is very likely to destroy its own creator. A shocking and horrible predicament of modern civilisation.

It was not just the moral inadequacy and extravagant pretensions of modern civilisation, but its treacherously deceptive, hypnotic and self-destructive tendency that was the theme of Hind Swaraj. Gandhi was firmly of the view that modern civilisation has the seductive colour of a consumptive person who clings to life but is doomed to die. This analogy brings Gandhi very close to Tawney’s image of a hypochondriac who is so absorbed in the process of his digestion that he goes to his grave before he has begun to live.

Gandhi’s Own Model of Modern Civilisation

Like Karl Marx, Gandhi professed the doom of modern civilisation. Yet his view of humanity and history was fundamentally optimistic owing to the certainty of his
personally tested but unprovable faith. Even Hind Swaraj conceded “civilisation is not an incurable disease”; that people are not bad at heart and their mode of thought is not inherently immoral. Civilisation stands self-condemned but it is possible for courageous and compassionate men to take up a massive programme of action.

If Gandhi condemned what he called the pseudo-civilisation of the capitalist and communist systems of industrialisation, what was then his own concept of civilisation? In his thought, civilisation is that mode of conduct which points to the path of duty. This may seem to be odd to us because all of us claim to be civilised without performing our duty. Gandhi quite candidly said: “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.” This may seem an unusual definition of civilisation, but Mirabeu, who was the first person in the world to employ the word, civilisation, similarly gave a moral criterion: “............... Civilisation does nothing for society unless it is able to give form and substance to virtue.”

Thus Gandhi, in his indictment of the so-called modern civilisation, rejected crude materialism. And today the idea of “small is beautiful” is merely the echo of Gandhi’s concept of civilisation. But let it not be forgotten that Gandhi was not a fanatical opponent of all machinery, wealth and power. He was not against these so much as ruthless mechanisation and power–mania.

Ours is an age of paradoxes. Inglorious paradoxes. In modern times men have built wonderful cities, they have also invented bombs to match them to reduce them to rubble in the twinkle of an eye. Gandhi objected to this soulless and heartless progress of modern civilisation. Indeed, there is hardly any doubt that we are passing through an evolutionary crisis. Man’s mind, brain, intellectual calibre and prudence are perhaps not enough to tide over the crisis. The question is: should man let himself be swept by the deadly current of the so-called modern civilisation, or should he try to tap some hidden strength which might mean a new birth for him? If the answer is the second, there is no other alternative than to accept and practise Gandhi’s model of civilisation And here Gandhi is relevant for any age, for any country, and for any situation. We believe that man had not evolved to disappear without living a meaningful life; nor is he destined to go up in the smoke of self-inflicted holocaust. It is not for such an end that man has dreams, visions and manifold inspirations in arts and aesthetic endeavours. This is what Gandhi implicitly highlighted in Hind Swaraj in his indictment of modern civilisation.

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