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Discontents of Modern Civilization: Gandhi's Critique of Colonial Discourse in *Hind Swaraj*

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Abstract:

Mahatma (i.e. Mohandas Karamchand) Gandhi is the personality appearing during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries in India who has shined on both the national and the international scenario on account not only of (but largely due to) his active involvement in the Indian freedom-struggle but also for his theoretical vision conceived as his preaching and the philosophy of his life. However, his contribution to the Indian freedom-struggle movement outshines his contribution as an 'anti-colonial' thinker (Hiddleston: 2009) leading to the un-proportionate attention focused on the importance of his theoretical position for understanding the postcolonial movement. In the present article, a modest attempt has been made to look at the theoretical position of Gandhi from the colonial and postcolonial perspectives. In fact, many scholars have already appropriately spent enormous amount of ink and space to discuss his stand expressed in terms of his actions. The present article, however, concentrates only on one of his works, i.e. *Hind Swaraj*, or *Indian Home Rule*. The book was written in 1909, on board from South Africa to India, and is in the form of an interview: the Reader asks the questions and the Editor (i.e. Mahatma Gandhi) elaborates his views on the questions. The book encapsulates Gandhi's conception of human life in general and can be treated as his theoretical position on different issues he discusses in the book. It is basically considered to be Gandhi's critique of modern civilization represented by the institution of European colonialism and imperialism. As per the orientation of the researchers, the book has been interpreted from different perspectives, leading to such concerns like Gandhi's views on Education, Civilization, Morality, Rural Development, Materialism, Non-violence, Ahimsa, etc. However, the researcher thinks that Gandhi's importance as a postcolonial thinker is more significant. As a result, in the present article, it has been proposed that many ideas and concepts employed in the book, if contextualized in the postcolonial discourse, can lead to more fruitful and illuminating interpretation not only of the ruler-ruled relationship but also the very foundations on which the institution of colonialism is established.

Keywords: Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Civilization, Colonial Discourse, Materialism, etc.

I

Postcolonialism or Postcolonial Theory has been conceived as the writing back to the Empire (Ashcroft et al. 1989) and basically involves the analysis of the cultures associated with colonialism/imperialism. Some critics have associated the Postcolonial school to the general Post-structural movement that emerged and was prominent during the second half of the 20th Century. Selden et al. (2005: 228) considers it as movement entering in the agenda of

the metropolitan intellectuals and academics as 'a reflex of a new consciousness attendant on Indian independence (1947) and as part of a general leftist reorientation of the 'Third-World' struggles from the 1950s onwards'. As is clear, Selden et al. in the above lines, relate the movement of Postcolonialism to the general shift, which is evident in the writing of Derrida, caused in the orientation due to the challenging of the structure based view of the world. Thus, for Selden et al., the movement is both temporal and ideological: Temporal because it appears after 1950s and ideological because it is based on the leftist ideas. Their conception of the movement seems to include the ideas and assumptions generated both in the West and the non-West. However, some scholars restrict it to the ideas and knowledge proposed by the non-West in reaction against the 'knowledge' of the West:

Postcolonial theory involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the west. It is concerned with developing the driving ideas of a political practice morally committed to transforming the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which large sections of the world's population live out their daily lives.

(Young 2003: 6)

As the above quote illustrates, Postcolonial Theory is concerned with two different 'knowledges': West's knowledge of the East and East's knowledge of the East. That is to say, during the period of the colonization, the West has essentially created some stereotypes related to the existence of the East in order to facilitate its rule over the East. In fact, this has been considered as the 'colonial ideology' leading to the successful and unhampered domination of the West over the East. Thinking in the same paradigm, Postcolonial Theory is the reaction against the way the East has been conceived and misconceived by the West. Thus, it seeks to undo with the earlier orientations posed by the West and intends to substitute them by the actual reorientations perceived by the East. Thus, it is the ideological stand taken by East upon its realization that it has been misinterpreted by those who, in reality, have no knowledge of the things. It is, in a way, as Ngugi wa Thiong'O (1981) argues, the knowledge about the East based on the Eurocentric standards and norms. Since these reactions to the earlier conceived knowledge about the East are highly personal and based on the individual's assumptions and perceptions of the world, there is a great amount of variation and heterogeneity present in Postcolonial Theory, which make Hiddleston (2009: 1) contend:

The term "postcolonialism" can generally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and sprawling in scope. While "anti-colonialism" names specific movements of resistance to colonialism, postcolonialism refers to the wider, multifaceted effects and implications of colonial rule. Postcolonialism frequently offers a challenge to colonialism, but does not constitute a single programme of resistance; indeed, it is considered consequently by some to be rather vague and panoptic in its ever more ambitious field of enquiry.

As Hiddleston in the above quote indicates, Postcolonialism or Postcolonial Theory is not restricted to any one discipline but responses have been put forward across disciplines to

correct and restore the misinterpreted and even wrong assumptions regarding the East. Such a diverse nature of inquiry may not be a theory in a strict scientific sense of the term, for a theory is 'a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena' (Young *ibid*: 6).

Though the above discussion point to the elusive nature of the term 'postcolonialism', what is important for us here are the misconceptions and the misconceived assumptions established by the West during the period of colonialism. Some of these misconceptions are about the concepts of civilization, nation, nationalism, the ruled, slave, etc. In the foregoing discussion, the researcher intends to unearth the ways in which these stereotypes are proposed and maintained and juxtapose them with Gandhi's opinions regarding these concepts.

II

Mahatma Gandhi and his *Hind Swaraj* have been studied from different perspectives. It will be appropriate here to refer to the opinions that some of the scholars have formed regarding Gandhi, the man, and his works. In his study of Gandhi and existentialism, Dadhich (1993: 56) argues that Gandhi was successful as a mass leader, but as a theoretician he was a sheer failure. However, this argument has not been accepted by the other scholars. Evaluating the power of non-violence for the practical purposes, Delton (1993: 16) declares Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* as 'a proclamation of ideological independence'. It may be due the freedom the book calls forth that the book was banned by the colonial government in 1910. Tamer (2009), while studying the simplicity of the Gandhian discourse in *Hind Swaraj*, argues that the simplicity of the text and its language should not be confused with the simplicity of the ideas and the ideology it unfolds. Rather, he is of the opinion that Gandhi has elaborated his complex views regarding the nature of civilization in a very deceptive simple language. Tamer also seem to think that in addition to the success that Gandhi obtained as a mass leader, he is equally successful as a theoretician of colonialism. Supporting the view that the institution of colonialism is based on the 'civilizing mission', Heredia (1999) elaborates the importance of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and his theoretical position:

In rejecting this modern civilization, Gandhi is subverting the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise at its core; for there could be no colonialism without a civilizing mission since it could hardly be sustained in India by brute force. (1999: 1497)

In the above quote, Heredia refers to the 'civilizing mission' of the colonial ideology. As has been maintained by many scholars, for the colonizer it was not possible to rule over the colonized land only with the help of the gun. Fully aware of this, they prepared and propagated their Eurocentric ideology which helped them not only to rule over the land successfully but also to exploit the indigenized for their purposes. A part of such ideology is the propagation of the 'binary oppositions'. Binary oppositions mean those oppositions that involve only two opposing entities. Some of these binary oppositions are elaborated by Ashcroft, *et al.* (2004) in the following way:

Colonizer : Colonized

White	:	Black
Civilized	:	Primitive
Advanced	:	Retarded
Good	:	Evil
Beautiful	:	Ugly
Human	:	Bestial
Teacher	:	Pupil
Doctor	:	Patient (pp.24-25)

As the terms employed in oppositions indicate, they are divided into two categories and are applied to refer to the two parties involved in the colonial encounter: the ruler and the ruled. If we investigate the nature of such 'binarism', it is seen that the first opposition is the result of the socio-historical fact; the second is based on the physical features. Both of them are acceptable. However, if we examine the remaining oppositions closely, it is seen that the terms are relative in that the criteria employed for their assessment is subjective. That is to say, a particular man may be assessed as 'civilized' or as 'primitive' with reference to certain criteria, but the criteria employed for the purpose might be faulty and may lead to misinterpretation. Similarly, it has been proposed that the distinction between the 'civilized' and the 'primitive' is essentially binary in that there is no third term and also that the distinction between them is complete and there is no fuzziness of boundaries. The same is the case of the other terms: the concept of what is 'advanced' or 'retarded' may vary from person to person and from society to society; what is it to be 'good' or 'evil' and how is it assessed; what is the idea of the 'beautiful'; what is meant to be 'human' or bestial; etc.

The 'binarism' thus refers to the construction of the pejorative identities of the indigenous people involved in the colonial discourse as perceived by the colonizer from the European perspectives. The very institution of colonialism and the ideology it holds are associated with the idea of 'civilization'. Moreover, it is argued that the European colonizers are often seen to support their rule over the colonized countries with the assertion that the colonized people are barbaric and uncivilized and through their contact with the colonizer, who is civilized, the former may get the opportunities to improve themselves from the primitive stage to the modern ones. That is to say, the Europeans perceived themselves as on the 'civilizing mission' of the colonized countries. The ongoing discussion points to the fact that the very existence of colonialism is rested on the concept of 'civilization'. Since the term 'civilization' is such an important concern and concept in both the colonial and the postcolonial discourse, it is essential to look into the way Mahatma Gandhi has delineated civilization in his text and his opinions regarding the institution.

Like many philosophers of the earlier period as J. S. Mill, Carlyle, Thoreau, Ruskin, Tolstoy, etc, Gandhi also assesses the implications of the 'modern civilization'. Since he has visited Europe, he could look into the phenomenon of 'modern civilization' from both the European and the Indian perspectives. For the Europeans, 'modern civilization' is characterised by such attributes as: rationalism, secularization, industrialization, the scientific culture, individualism, technological mastery of nature, the drive towards globalization and

liberal democracy (Parekh 1997). However, Gandhi intends to examine the institution from the ethical and the moral perspectives. He wants to assess it from the perspectives of the one who has suffered due to the institution. He considers it as 'fundamentally flawed' institution, because it is 'aggressive, imperialist, violent, exploitative, brutal, unhappy, restless and devoid of a sense of direction and purpose' (Parekh 1997: 79). Gandhi knew that any person who is involved in the institution and reaping its fruits may not be able to speak against it, so he tries to specify the vices and the weaknesses of the modern civilization.

According to Gandhi, the modern civilization is essentially based on the principle of 'bodily-welfare'. That is to say, the body is at the centre and the only object worth caring for. Parekh (1997) rightly points out that Gandhi condemned the modern civilization for its excessive focus on the human body which represents two prominent aspects: of individualism and of material greed. This explains the reason of the 'materialist' nature and orientation of the institution of modern civilization. Moreover, the institution does not seek to glorify the physical labour; rather seeks to change Man into a machine, leading to many ills to the general condition of mankind. Thus, the modern civilization is responsible for enslaving the people by the temptation of money and luxuries. In this context, Gandhi appropriately asserts that the English have not taken India; rather, we have given it to them, because we were tempted by the luxuries that modern civilization promised.

By uncovering the fundamental limitations of the 'modern civilization', Gandhi has tried to indicate that the Indian civilization is essentially a better civilization than the modern European and it is wrong to say that the colonized in the present case are in any way primitive. Thus, the dialectic of the ruler/ruled has been handled by Gandhi in reverse way, making change it upside down. In fact, Gandhi's analysis of modern civilization can be used to deconstruct the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Gandhi provides his own understanding of the Indian civilization in the following way:

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

The bringing together of both the physical and the moral concerns in the concept of civilization, Gandhi seems to suggest that these are the criteria with the help of which the strength of a civilization need to be assessed. However, it would be wrong to say that Gandhi did not care for the bodily comforts. Quite the contrary, his attack on the modern civilization is due to its excessive emphasis on the bodily comforts at the cost of the welfare of the soul.

Gandhi also refers to the general assumptions regarding the equation of happiness with the modern civilization and points out many flaws in such logic. It is generally assumed that the modern civilization is marked by the industrialization resulting in the possession of money and luxuries of life. The human life is said to have improved and became happy. In this context, Gandhi also points out that the state of being happy does not necessarily depend

upon the riches and the luxuries of life. So it would be wrong to assume that more money and more amenities of life brought in by the modern civilization will lead to more happy human life. Gandhi, however, does not forget to point out that some Indians have fall prey to the onslaught of the materialism of the modern civilization; because of its temptation of material prosperity resulting from the industrialism. However, for Gandhi, Indian civilization is great, for it can bear the shock and will be tested on the touchstone of time. Supporting the Indian civilization and the balance it represents, Gandhi further maintains:

It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fire. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could do with our hands and feet.

In fact, this assertion of the Mahatma presents him in the form of a seer who has seen the evils caused due to materialism of the modern civilization.

Turning to the 'civilizing mission' of the West, on the basis of the on-going analysis of the views of Gandhi, it can be seen that the Indian people do not need to be civilized. They are already civilized to the extent to which they cannot have recourse to the 'brute force' which is often employed by the money-minded and morally bankrupt citizens of the modern civilization which has no sense of the direction and future. In order to support the immoral and unethical ruling of the colony, it is thus wrong to suggest that India is the country of the uncivilized people. In this context, Parekh (1997: 82) argues: "For Gandhi, European Imperialism was a natural expression of the aggressive and exploitative impulse lying at the heart of modern civilization." In fact, what Parekh says is true for the institution of colonialism, for the imperial ideology proposed by it is essentially based on the stereotyped view of the colonized people which has been challenged by Gandhi in this booklet.

Another important term included in the 'binarism' is the distinction between doctors and patients. The Western colonizers equated themselves with doctors who save and condition the life of the patients, the colonized people. This is yet another metaphorical representation in the form of ideology created during the colonial discourse. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi also criticizes doctors, lawyers and railways. He criticizes the doctors because they, to the name of civilization, use brute force to kill animals and use their parts as the medicines. Similarly, he criticizes the doctors and their medicines on stoic grounds as well. Since the doctors provide the medicine to cure the illness, the body cannot suffer. Consequently, the body cannot create the natural resistance for the illness. Thus, the body has been conditioned for the material aspects. Regarding the lawyers, Gandhi is of the opinion that they are the evils of the modern civilization, since they maintain their livelihood on the basis of the unrest between the two parties. Therefore, they always think ill of the parties and never in reality cure the ill from the society. Regarding the railways, the writer says that it represents the culmination of the irreligious and immoral modern civilization, since the railways help only the evil. Therefore, all these entities are the sins of the modern civilization.

Investigating the theoretical contribution of Mahatma Gandhi for the Indian freedom struggle and contrasting it with that of Fanon, Hiddleston (2009: 55) points out that, unlike Fanon and others, Gandhi is not a nationalist philosopher in the sense that his concept of nation is very broad in scope. Similarly, Gandhi's call for colonial resistance nowhere rests on the concept of national identity. That is to say, Gandhi never supported the view that only during the freedom-struggle movement that the colonized became nationalist. These two distinctions of Gandhi, according to Hiddleston, set him apart as a political thinker. In fact, one of the assumptions of the postcolonial theories is that the concept of 'nation' itself has been provided by the colonial rule. Earlier there was lack of such unifying force leading to the lack of the nationalist spirit among the masses. However, Gandhi does not seem to support this stand. He is firmly of the opinion that India is the land of religions and its forefathers were all aware of the national feelings and accordingly in Hindu religion, many of its pilgrim-places are established on each of the four sides of India. The establishment of these places guarantee that the Indians were aware of the fact that they are one nation and there is no need of any outsider to make them realize their nationalism.

III

The ongoing analysis indicates that Gandhi's theoretical stands regarding the nature of civilization and its forces surely make us understand the falsity of the 'binarism' maintained and proposed during the colonial discourse. The use of the binary opposites as the expression of the ideology of the colonizer is purposeful and contriving behaviour stemmed from materialism. Gandhi's critique of the modern civilization, on both moral and religious grounds, in fact uncovers the barbaric 'brute force' of the so called civilized. Similarly, the text challenges the established views regarding the colonizer and the colonized and, following the humanitarian attitude, helps Gandhi argue that both the colonizers and the colonized fall prey to the material temptation of the 'modern civilization'. In fact, Gandhi's Universalist views can best be seen as the alternative for the parochial attitude of the West. The discussion also shows that Gandhi's views on Civilization, Religion, Doctors, Lawyers, Railways, Nation and Nationalism can contribute, to a great extent, in the understanding of India, the West and the Colonial discourse. Moreover, the booklet represents the non-Western perspective on the civilization. In the period of the neo-colonialism it is essential for us to understand the true nature of civilization and its forces so that at least during the present era we may identify the threat from the institution of neo-colonialism and imperialism.

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