
UNIT 11 **GANDHIAN VISION**

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

Truth and non-violence form the two main pillars of Gandhi's vision and practice. Gandhi's vision could be articulated and executed only through the means of non-violence, for he believed that only good means could lead to good ends. Ends and means were thus interrelated in Gandhi's thought.

Gandhi opined that human beings were not capable of knowing the complete or absolute truth and that is why nobody had the right to commit violence on others, lest they may be in the wrong. Gandhi also believed in the goodness of human beings and that they had divine powers. These divine powers could be used to awaken the conscience.

Gandhi laid out his vision for India in *Hind Swaraj*, as well as in his speeches and writings in *Young India* and *Harijan*. His vision was a holistic one which touched upon all the areas of life – religious, moral, social-cultural (includes education), political (includes foreign policy), and economic. He wrote and spoke about it extensively and therefore it will not be possible to touch on all the facets of his vision for India. In the

section given below, some important and most talked about aspects of his vision have been discussed.

Aims and Objectives

After going through this Unit, you will:

- Understand Gandhi's criticism of modern civilisation;
- Comprehend the Gandhian alternative to modern civilisation; and
- Appreciate the ideas and programmes to actualise the alternative to modern civilisation as expounded by Gandhi.

11.2 CRITIQUE OF MODERN CIVILISATION

Gandhi was among the few leaders of the world who thought deeply about the problems afflicting human civilisation and ways to overcome them. He had done intensive study of works of thinkers like Edward Carpenter, John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy. These thinkers, in various ways, were critical of modern western society and its materialistic achievements behind which lay hidden deep-seated social and moral problems. Gandhi was also deeply moved by the moral ideas found in different religious traditions including Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and other traditions. Gandhi's experience of colonial oppression in South Africa further disillusioned him and led him to develop a far reaching critique of Modern society as it had developed in the west. This he published in the form of a booklet named *Hind Swaraj* in 1909. Throughout his life, Gandhi stood by the thoughts he had expressed in *Hind Swaraj* which contains the most coherent expression of Gandhi's world view.

According to Gandhi, the basic problem with the Modern civilisation was that there was too much emphasis on increasing people's physical comforts through production of goods and services rather than ensuring true physical, social, emotional and spiritual well being of the people. Gandhi measured the progress of a civilisation not through its material comforts but by its morality. He said in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909:

“The people in Europe today live in better-built houses than they did a hundred years ago. This is considered an emblem of civilization, and this is also a matter to promote bodily happiness...This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion.”

Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation was not just a philosophical or abstract critique. Displaying acute insight into the social problems resulting from industrialisation, he pointed out the poor condition of millions of workers in Europe, the decline in quality of life with new diseases and new forms of exploitation, the degradation of women, the stranglehold of money and selfish interests on the Parliamentary system, and

consumerism and unbridled competition that took away all fellow feeling and enslaved man to his darker side and dehumanised society.

Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation was also related to the nature of impact that British rule had on India. He believed that rather than Britain as a country, it was Modern civilisation as it was expressed in British rule in India that was responsible for the suffering of the Indian people. In *Hind Swaraj* he opined:

“It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It is groaning under the monster's terrible weight.”

Gandhi argued that India was not won by physical force but the temptation that East India Company offered to Indians in the form of commerce and profit. In *Hind Swaraj* he wrote:

“The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them... Recall the Company Bahadur. Who made it Bahadur? They had not the slightest intention at the time of establishing a kingdom. Who assisted the Company's officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History testifies that we did all this... it is truer to say that we gave India to the English than that India was lost.”

Under the impact of the British rule India had been impoverished, its traditional village economy destroyed, seeds of communalism sown between Hindus and Muslims, and its traditional culture transformed. Gandhi was acutely aware that what British rulers called the gifts of civilisation in the form of new system of government, laws and technology had actually been instrumental in the exploitation of India. He wrote to that effect in *Hind Swaraj*:

“Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country so much so that, if we do not wake up in time, we shall be ruined...the railways, too, have spread bubonic plague. Without them the masses could not move from place to place...Railways have also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain and it is sent to the dearest markets.”

Gandhi was thus not making a statement against progress by opposing Modern civilisation, what he was opposing was the greed and brutality that were the driving forces behind colonialism which had no moral justification. Colonialism represented the worst aspect of Modern civilisation where abandoning all moral principles, the British were exploiting India.

11.3 GANDHI'S IDEA OF *SWARAJ*

Since the root cause of India's exploitation was not Englishmen as such but the civilisation they represented, for India, freedom did not mean just replacement of British rule by Indian rule. He did not just want the 'replacement of British Rockefeller by Indian Rockefeller'. For him *Swaraj* meant cultural freedom or the freedom from the domination of modern civilisation. It implied recreating a society based on India's traditional civilisation. For Gandhi, Indian civilisation lived in its villages. The essence of this civilisation was moral restraint and spirit of fellow feeling among the people. In other words it was the moral fiber of village society that Gandhi considered as the hallmark of Indian civilisation. This made Indian villages the basis of Indian civilisation. For Gandhi, therefore, the true meaning of *Swaraj* lay in recovering the civilisation that India had lost. *Swaraj* has political, economic, moral and social connotations.

11.3.1 GRAM SWARAJ

Panchayats had become defunct during the British rule. They would have to be revived. The revival of Panchayats would ensure participation of the villagers in the political life and the decision-making process of the village community. This would lead to Gram *Swaraj*, the political dimension of *Swaraj*.

11.3.2 *SWADESHI* AND SELF-RELIANCE

Swadeshi or the use of indigenous resources, is the economic aspect of *Swaraj*. Reconstruction of the village economy that had been destroyed by the British rule was essential in order to make villages self-reliant. *Swaraj* would then mean freedom for the Indian villages. The Constructive Programme could make the village economies self-reliant. The Constructive Programme was an integral part of the Gandhian strategy. The use of indigenous resources plus the development of village handicrafts and khadi industries were to be the moral and economic means for the regeneration of Indian villages and hence the attainment of *Swaraj*.

11.3.3 *RAMRAJYA*

Gandhi's vision of *Swaraj* was part of a wider programme of social transformation which emphasised removal of the wants of millions of poor who had suffered as a result of British rule. Gandhi did not separate the political, the economic and the cultural aspects of *Swaraj*, rather they were part of his holistic conception in which all these aspects were interrelated. This holistic conception was represented by the idea borrowed from Ramayana tradition – *Ramarajya*. *Ramarajya* was Gandhi's vision of a just society and he elaborated it in the following way:

“In my opinion *swaraj* and *Ramarajya* are one and the same thing... We call a *Sate* *Ramarajya* when both the ruler and his subjects are straightforward, when both are pure in heart, when both are inclined towards self-sacrifice, when both

exercise restraint and self control while enjoying worldly pleasures, and, when the relationship between the two is as good as that between a father and a son. It is because we have forgotten this that we talk of democracy or the government of the people. Although this is the age of democracy, I do not know what that word connotes; however, I would say that democracy exists where the people's voice is heard, where love of the people holds a place of prime importance. In my *Ramarajya*, however, public opinion cannot be measured by counting of heads or raising hands.....The rishis and the munisafter doing penance came to the conclusion that public opinion is the opinion of people who practice penance and who have the good of the people at heart.”

Ramrajya was thus not a theocratic state. It was essentially a moral idea defined by people's sense of duty towards right social conduct and fellow feeling. The British justified their rule in India by saying that they were trying to modernise the Indians. *Ramrajya* provided an alternative to that Western modernity. By rejecting the Western form of parliamentary democracy and nation-state, Gandhi also undermined the ideological hegemony of colonialism.

Ramrajya, an idiom that was taken from rural Indian society, found an echo in the hearts and minds of millions of peasants in India. It provided the ideology for mobilising the masses of India against the domination of the British.

11.3.4 SARVODAYA AND ANTYODAYA

Sarvodaya represents Gandhi's vision of the new human society, a new social order, which would strive for the betterment and welfare of all humankind and living beings. It has both positive and negative connotations. B S Sharma in his article “*The Philosophical Basis of Sarvodaya*”, in the journal *Gandhi Marg* published in July 1960 defined the negative conception of *Sarvodaya* as “... not something which one man or set of men can gain or enjoy to the exclusion of others.” Positively speaking, it is “an activity in which all may partake and in which all must partake if it is to amount to a full realization of the human faculties of the human soul.” *Sarvodaya* would thus mean the welfare of all – every individual and all individuals, in all the areas – religious, moral, political, social and economic. The ultimate goal of *Sarvodaya* is the greatest good of all living beings. What constitutes ‘the greatest good’ has been explained by Gandhi in a note written in August 1947:

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it

restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.”

Gandhi's ideal of *Sarvodaya* was borrowed from John Ruskin's *Unto His Last* and contains three concepts: community, equality and dignity of labour. Each individual has to work for the welfare of all, as there is no growth without the growth of the society and vice versa. Thus the growth of the individual and the society are interrelated. Equality means equality of both intellectual work and body work. Dignity of labour acknowledges the dignity of physical labour. Through the doctrine of *Sarvodaya*, Gandhi rejected the laissez-faire theory as well as the utilitarian concept of the greatest good of the greatest number.

Gandhi believed that *Antyodaya* was the means to achieve *Sarvodaya*. *Antyodaya* literally means the rise of the last. A *Sarvodaya* society can only come about when we have reached the poorest of the poor.

11.4 RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Gandhi was a deeply religious person. The moral principles underlying various religious traditions had played an important part in shaping his basic attitudes. For example, the Jain principles of *aparigraha*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, *satya* and *ahimsa* were his abiding guide to social conduct. Yet Gandhi did not hold any narrow view of religion or religious identity. As he wrote in *Young India* on 22 December 1927:

“I do not expect India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Musalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.”

Gandhi never accepted the idea that the basis of nationality has to be religion in spite of his belief that religion plays an important role in society. He expressed this view categorically in *Hind Swaraj*:

“India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty of assimilation.... India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Musalmans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own

interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been in India.”

Gandhi, while standing for the freedom of a person to live according to the dictates of his or her religion, upheld the principle of coexistence of faiths and principle of non-interference. It was this openness of Gandhi that made him a votary of Hindu-Muslim unity which he built as a pillar of his vision of *Swaraj*. Gandhi never accepted the two-nation theory and was deeply saddened by the partition.

11.5 EDUCATION

The idea of education and how it should be conducted was another important theme in Gandhi’s vision and thought. Gandhi’s ideal of an educated man is as described by Huxley in the following words:

“His body is the servant of his will and does its work with ease and pleasure....his mind is stored with knowledge of the fundamental truths of nature; his passions are under the control of a vigorous will and a tender conscience; he has learned to hate all vileness and to respect others as himself. Such a man and no other has had a liberal education.”

Gandhi believed in a conception of education where man was in harmony with nature and was able to control his senses. His vision of education was thus one where it had to be necessarily geared towards character-building. Primary education or *Nai Talim* or *Buniyaadi Talim* should be focused on character-building—this becomes the foundation—a building built on this foundation will be able to sustain itself. Education had to be training of the body, mind and soul. Ethical education or training of the spirit was to be given prime importance. Children had to be taught the dignity of labour right from their infancy. Gandhi wanted teachers to teach students through the medium of handicrafts, laying emphasis on manual training, not just intellectual training. Also they had to lead by example. Gandhi wanted the Indian children to be educated in their mother tongues. He felt that English education was of very little value to the Indians. Higher education was missing out from the Gandhian visionary thought; however, he did mention that higher education could be left to private enterprise and should be related to national necessities.

The most unique suggestion that Gandhi proposed with regard to education especially compulsory mass education was that India’s national system of education should be made self-sufficient. He wrote in *Harijan*:

“..as a nation, we are so backward in education that we cannot hope to fulfill our obligations to the nation in this respect in a given time during this generation, if the programme is to depend on money. I have therefore made bold, even at the

risk of losing all reputation for constructive ability, to suggest that education should be self-supporting...I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. Thus every school can be made self-supporting, the condition being that the State takes over the manufactures of these schools." (5:197)

Henry Fagg in his book *Back to the Sources: A Study of Gandhi's Basic Education* written in 2002 is supportive of the above idea on three counts:

"Gandhi's confidence in the practicality of self-support although abrasive, was not ill-founded...Part of his motives were undoubtedly financial; the task of educating India's millions would be an undertaking of colossal proportions, for which there were simply no funds.....A second reason....was that to produce saleable items would be a kind of quality control, a check put in place to ensure that the education imparted had been truly vocational. His scheme of education can also therefore be understood as facilitating a form of economic planning....The third reason...is that craft training results in 'the conservation of the intellectual energy and *indirectly also the spiritual*.'"

Thus Gandhi's main purpose in advocating for education that was self-supporting was that it would not just ensure imparting of education but will also cut at the roots of unemployment and develop the body, mind and soul.

Gandhi also gave some thought to adult education. He elaborated upon it in his *Constructive Programme* in the following manner:

"If I had charge of adult education, I should begin with opening the minds of the adult pupils to the greatness and vastness of their country.....My adult education means, therefore, first true political education of the adult by word of mouth....Side by side with the education by the mouth will be the literary education."

Gandhi managed to do some practical experiments in the field education during his days in the Tolstoy Farm. These experiments further affirmed his ideas on education.

11.6 TRUSTEESHIP

Gandhi explained the theory of trusteeship as expounded by him in the following words in *Harijan* written on 3 June 1939:

"Suppose I have come by a fair amount of wealth either by way of legacy, or by means of trade and industry, I must know that all that wealth does not belong to me, what belongs to me is the right to an honourable livelihood, no better than

that enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of my wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community.....”

Trusteeship thus meant that “each would hold whatever assets they possessed in trust for the good of the society.” The rich would use their wealth for the benefit of all those who worked for them while the labourers on the other hand would provide their labour to all those who needed them. In the Gandhian vision, nobody should indulge in an extravagant life but just take only that which is required for a simple, comfortable life. Gandhi also talked of trusteeship more as a conviction, not something that can be forced and therefore even if one person adopted the approach, it was worth it. Henceforth, he said the following on 3 June 1939 in *Harijan*:

“The question how many can be real trustees according to this definition is beside the point. If the theory is true, it is immaterial whether many live up to it or only one man lives up to it. The question is of conviction...”

Gandhi’s aim in proposing the theory of trusteeship, was to inculcate the spirit of *aparigraha* or non-possession.

11.7 ROLE OF WOMEN

Gandhi’s vision of creative social transformation by non-violent means did not ignore the women of India. In his vision of *Ramarajya*, men and women had an equal place in society. Speaking at the Women’s Conference, Sojitra on January 16, 1925, he said:

“To women I talk about Ramarajya. Ramarajya is more than swarajya. Let me therefore talk about what Ramarajya will be like—not about swaraj. Ramarajya can come about only when there is likelihood of a Sita arising. Among the many *shlokas* recited by Hindus, one is on women. It enumerates women who are worthy of being remembered prayerfully early in the morning.....As long as women whose body and mind tend in one direction—i.e, towards the path of virtue—do not come into public life and purify it, we are not likely to attain Ramarajya or swaraj. Even if we did, I would have no use for that kind of swaraj to which such women have not made their full contribution.....”

In Gandhi’s vision, women were thus not confined to the walls of the household but were encouraged to play a part in India’s freedom struggle. Under Gandhi’s leadership, women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Sucheta Kripalani, came to the fore.

11.8 FREEDOM FROM UNTOUCHABILITY

The practice of untouchability represented for Gandhi not only a social evil which had no place in civilised society but also something which he held to be a ‘sin against God and

man', something profoundly immoral. While reformers like Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekananda, Jyotiba Phule had attacked untouchability, what was significant about Gandhi was that he made the campaign against untouchability a part of the freedom movement. Thus when the Non-cooperation movement was launched, removal of untouchability was included among the basic prerequisites for the attainment of *Swaraj*. He stated in *Young India* on 29 October 1920:

“Non-cooperation against the government means cooperation among the governed, and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability there will be no swaraj whether in one year or in hundred years....swaraj is unattainable without the removal of the sins of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity.”

Gandhi considered himself to be a 'Sanatani Hindu', that is someone who abided by Hindu scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas and yet he was not orthodox in his religious beliefs. For him 'truth' was the highest expression of religion and truth in a relative sense was something that represented the 'inner voice' or the 'voice of conscience'. Gandhi thus rejected anything which he considered to be immoral and against truth. Religion for him was a matter of praxis or a lived reality rather than a body of beliefs or rituals. He constantly reminded that morality and truth should not be dissociated from religion. He always tested scriptures on the yardstick of reason and truth. It is in this perspective that we can understand his rejection of untouchability even while retaining his belief in *Varnashram dharma*.

Varnashram, according to Gandhi, was simply a 'law of heredity', a scientific truth which Hinduism accepted. Thus he said "Not to abide by one's varna is to disregard the law of heredity". What Gandhi rejected however, was division into numerous castes or *jatis*, the idea of high and low or superior and inferior and the concept of pollution by touch. While *varna* division related to division of labour by defining duties, they did not define privileges. He wrote in *Young India* on 6 October 1921:

"I hold against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate oneself a higher status or assign to another a lower. All are born to serve God's creation, a Brahmin with knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaisya with his commercial ability and Sudra with his bodily labour. This however does not mean that a Brahmin for instance is absolved from bodily labour, or the duty of protecting himself and others... But a Brahmin who claims superiority by right of knowledge falls, and has no knowledge. And so with others who pride themselves upon their special qualities. Varnashrama is self-restraint and conservation and economy of energy".

It is clear therefore that Gandhi considered all *varnas* as equal. Moreover Gandhi attached highest value to the dignity of labour which he demonstrated from his personal example. For him no work was 'polluting'. All the members of Sabarmati Ashram, which was founded in 1915, were enjoined to clean the toilets themselves. The rejection of the idea of social hierarchy and pollution erased the very basis of untouchability. He rejected the view that untouchables were a 'fifth caste' or *panchamas* as it was against the *varna* theory. He considered untouchability to be 'a blot on Hinduism' and an 'excrescence'. He spoke thus in *Young India*:

"In my opinion, untouchability in the form in which we practise today is not and ought not to be, an essential part of Hinduism. There is sheer ignorance and cruelty behind it. I look upon it as an excrescence on Hinduism."

The attack on untouchability reflects the depth of Gandhi's vision of creative social transformation. Gandhi differed from Ambedkar in two fundamental respects in his criticism of untouchability. One, he did not reject *varnashrama dharma* which Ambedkar considered to be the real basis of untouchability and was thus not willing to separate untouchables from Hinduism. It was for this reason that he opposed the Communal Award by Ramsay Macdonald in 1932 recognising the separate electorates for Scheduled Castes and went on a fast unto death.

Secondly, unlike Ambedkar who considered caste Hindus to be antagonistic to depressed classes and believed in social struggle on their behalf, Gandhi believed that change has to come from within caste Hindus by changing their attitude. It was for this reason that he addressed untouchables as *Harijans* and launched his *Harijan* campaign in the 1930s for the acceptance of *Harijans* as legitimate Hindus and as equals.

11.9 CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES

In the Gandhian conception, 'nature' had a very inclusive meaning. The interaction between human and non-human nature was necessary only to the point where humans were to use nature to earn subsistence and nothing more than that. In a speech given at YMCA, Madras on 16 February 1916, Gandhi said:

"If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thieve it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world."

Gandhi thus emphasized the need to conserve resources and use nature only to meet our daily subsistence needs. Today's conception of sustainable development and movements

for conservation of the environment draw heavily from Gandhi's ecological ideas. The Chipko Andolan is one such movement.

11.10 INDIA'S PLACE IN MODERN WORLD

In the Gandhian vision, India's foreign policy post-independence had to be guided by cooperation rather than conflict. Writing in *Young India* on 11 August 1920, he said, "If India takes up the doctrine of the sword, she may gain momentary victory. Then India will cease to be the pride of my heart." Indulging in violence and making it a creed was thus out of question.

Gandhi wanted India to be different from the rest of the countries of the world and emphasize on soul-force and stand for peace. There would then be no need for weapons. He said the following to this effect:

".. India's mission is different from that of others. India is fitted for the religious supremacy of the world.India is less in need of steel weapons, it has fought with divine weapons, it can still do so.....India can win all by soul force...."
(Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi).

As far as maintaining an army was concerned, Gandhi wanted India to have the "smallest army imaginable". The core of Indian foreign policy had to be non-violence. Writing in *Harijan* on 21 June 1942, Gandhi's advice to future foreign policy makers was:

"...I would advise the adoption of non-violence to the utmost extent possible and that will be India's great contribution to the peace of the world and the establishment of a new world order."

In Gandhi's vision thus, India had to assume a higher position in the world through the use of soul-force. This would lead to the establishment of a new and peaceful world order.

11.11 SUMMARY

Gandhi believed that the Indian civilisation was superior to the western one and it had the necessary ability to endure and survive the onslaughts of modernity. Only India could provide the alternative to modern civilisation as millions of Indians who lived in villages had not been influenced by the frills and fancies of modern civilisation. The idea of *Swaraj*, *Ramrajya*, *Sarvodaya*, Trusteeship, basic mass education and India's usage of soul-force to bring about peace and a new world order formed some of the major aspects of Gandhi's vision. All these components of the Gandhian alternative were essentially Indian.

In the later years of his life, Gandhi realised that practically speaking, it was not possible to rid India of many of the facets of modern civilisation such as railways and hospitals. They will have to be accepted as a 'necessary evil'. However, what he wanted or advocated for, was a vision of a world in which human beings would not be ruled by these things.

Gandhi's vision was essentially a transformative one, for he wanted to bring about these changes through the methods of non-violence, persuasion, appealing to the conscience, and attitudinal and behavioural interventions.

11.12 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the Gandhian critique of modern civilisation.
2. What is the Gandhian ideal of *Swaraj*? What are the means or mechanisms to achieve *Swaraj*?
3. What is the Gandhian alternative to modern civilisation? Discuss its major ingredients.
4. Discuss the Gandhian vision of education for India.
5. Describe the idea of Trusteeship as expounded by Gandhi.
6. Why is the abolition of untouchability a major goal for Gandhi? What were some of steps he undertook for the removal of untouchability?
7. What, according to Gandhi, should be India's role in the creation of a new world order? How does he suggest going about it?

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