

# EUROPEAN MODERNITY, INDIAN VARIANT AND GANDHIAN ALTERNATIVE: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

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In Europe, modernity means something which is not traditional, to break with the endless reiteration of classical themes, topics, and myths, to offer a critique of existing feudal super structure (political, moral, religious and legal systems), to defend and develop scientific explanation of every phenomenon, and to explain reality not only objectively but also as experienced by the subject. 'To be modern is to 'break with the past' and so search for new self-conscious expressive forms.<sup>i</sup> But modernity in India is not a rejection of the tradition rather there have been efforts by modern Indian philosophers including Gandhi to incorporate the traditional values, with certain ideas of reform.

Modernity, in the West, does not regard tradition as something to be taken for granted rather; it discards tradition as something obsolete, underdeveloped, which obstructs progress, development and efficiency. But what is a tradition? A tradition accepts certain value systems and ways of life from the earlier ages and has taken them for granted as being natural. Tradition also assigns individuals a fixed role and determines a fixed place in the social fabric. A traditional man would not even like to have a change. A modern philosopher, even if he has to live in a traditional society, he would not like to identify himself with it. He would prefer to live at a distance from the tradition. A modern would like to more choices and more possibilities.

### **Three Pillars of Modernity- Science, Morality and Art**

It was the period of 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, that European society underwent those crucial changes, which marked the transition from tradition to modernity. It was the period when centre shifted from religion and revelation to science and human rationality. With this separation, the European Middle Age entered into the New Age (*Neuzeit*). It goes to the credit of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who classified human experience into three distinct domains – Science, Morality and Art. In the first, we have the possibility, validity and limits of scientific knowledge, i.e. synthetic a priori knowledge. In the second,

there is the possibility of moral laws, i.e. the categorical imperative. Finally in the aesthetic experience, we discern what is sublime and beautiful. In the new enlightenment thinking, technically it is human reason that reconciles the three. Kant particularly was the one who was trying to distinguish between three kinds of reason-pure reason, practical reason and the judgement. In the one, you know the things (phenomena); in the other, you know how to act; in the third, you have to discern what is good. By making this separation, he held on the 'idea of reason' which was already divided into three compartments. European enlightenment has this problem that 'reason' as such is not able to fulfil the task of integrating everything. It has serious implications. As Kant has said, "Human reason has this peculiar fate; that in one of its species, it is burdened by the questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is neither able to answer nor is it able to ignore them."<sup>ii</sup> It has created dualism between fact and value, descriptive and prescriptive, is and ought, or as Kant has done it between phenomenon and noumenon. Kant agreed with Hume who created an unbridgeable gulf between 'is' and 'ought'. Hume has stated that many writers make claims about what *ought* to be on the basis of statements about what *is*. Hume found that there seems to be a significant difference between descriptive statements (about what is) and prescriptive or normative statements (about what ought to be), and that it is not obvious how one can coherently move from descriptive statements to prescriptive ones.<sup>iii</sup> Its implication is that science has no moral responsibility or that science is value neutral. Scientific pursuit could be concerned with what is, what has been and what will be. It has discarded what ought to be. It has been reflected in the model of education being completely anthropocentric discarding ecological and environmental issues in the whole of European modernity.

In addition, Max Weber characterised Cultural Modernity as the separation of substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous regions-Science, Morality and Art. For behind that separation of 'substantive reason' from

the religious consciousness, and also from its basic unity, is the fundamental act of the Modern- the repudiation of the Transcendent as the Unifying Principle, and its replacement by Human rationality as Sovereign and as the New Unifying principle of all experience and all understanding. The central and the fundamental thrust of the modern, it seems to me is the bold and unhesitating affirmation of the autonomy of human individual and society, as not dependent on, or answerable to, any other reality. It is that affirmation that repudiates all external authority, outside of human reason, whether of religions or of tradition. From that repudiation of external authority and the affirmation of human autonomy and sovereignty have come the other trappings of the Modern- e.g., Modern Science/Technology, Modern Urban/Industrial civilization, Modern Philosophy and Literature, and so on.<sup>iv</sup>

The beginnings of Modernity can be traced to that intellectual fever that spread in Europe from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The French Revolution of 1789 was a high point in the spread of this intellectual-spiritual as well as political-economic-social ferment in western society. The process lasted from mid-18<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is still spreading geographically, encompassing all cultures, which adopt the urban technological-industrial system, with its Capitalist mode of production, Calvinist-individualist "value-system". Culture, medicine, communication system, educational system and political-economic institutions are all based on human sovereignty and autonomy. We "modern educated people" are all today, in large measure, product of the ferment and process. In India the process is pervasive, but has not yet conquered all the people since all the people have not yet been educated!

### European Enlightenment:

Kant, in the December 1784 publication of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Berlin Monthly), edited by Friedrich Gedike and Johann Erich Biester, Kant replied to the question posed a year earlier by the Reverend Johann Friedrich Zöllner, who was also an official in the Russian government. Zöllner's question was addressed to a broad intellectual public, in reply to Biester's essay entitled: "Proposal, not to engage the clergy any longer when marriages are conducted" (April 1783) and a number of leading intellectuals replied with essays, of which Kant's is the most famous and has had the most impact. What is the European Enlightenment? It was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who asked that question and answered it in his article in the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift*, December 1783 issue, entitled *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? Or "Answer to the Question: What is the Enlightenment?"* Kant's opening paragraph of the essay is a much-cited definition of a lack of Enlightenment as people's inability to think for themselves due not to their lack of intellect, but lack of courage. It goes like this:

"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. This immaturity

is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another."<sup>v</sup>

The over-all ideal and goal of the Enlightenment was rational self-determination. On a personal level it was the idea that every individual had the right to determine for him or herself how to live and what to live for; a person's own reason and conscience was the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. On a social and political level it was the idea of democratic self-government: the citizens of an enlightened society do not feel that they need monarch or some other father figure to do their thinking and governing for them.

For Kant, a truly moral person cannot passively accept the customs and values of any society. A moral person has to determine rationally what is right and wrong; a moral person has to be "autonomous". Autonomy is the ability to live by one's own laws. According to this notion of autonomy, person is only bounded by his personal idea of right and wrong. So, in such case how ethical relativism could be avoided? Kant avoids the anti-social implications of certain kinds of individualism by designing a system of ethics which emphatically defines human beings as rational beings, and which explicitly makes the consideration of the interests of others as an integral part of being rational.

It is basically due to the faculty of reason that people are able to think as social beings, and not just as isolated individuals with their one-sided desires and goals. It is due to the reason that most plausibly connects human beings with each other, and which turns a merely natural society of competing individuals into a human community with common ground. An autonomous person thinks of himself or herself as a social being, not just as a solitary individual. Kant's moral philosophy is thus both individualistic and communitarian. It is individualistic because it falls on the individual to decide what is right and wrong. It is communitarian in so far as that decision is not made with respect to one's own interests alone, but by way of a rational deliberation which involves consideration of others. It is an individualism that is embedded in a community of other individuals who are all equally autonomous and beholden to the consideration of the interests of others. Kant insures that there is no contradiction between individual liberty and social responsibility. In a community of reason the two are not only compatible, but essentially the same.

The Modern, if not identical with that process, is certainly a consequence of that intellectual-spiritual ferment which is sometimes referred to as the European Enlightenment to distinguish it from other enlightenments like the Buddhist, to whom perhaps the term originally belongs. Enlightenment Liberalism, with its twin children of modern Science/Technology and the Urban-industrial society, and its outcomes, namely, the Marxist attempt to construct the ideal society, and the Positivist-Linguistic-Discourse endeavour to capture the truth in words is based on the affirmation of the

autonomy of the human individual and his /her capacity to know, shape and order the world.

### **Crisis of Modernity:**

The crisis in modernity started emerging during late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It became evident in self centered liberalism, with possessive individualism, having individual rights and discarding the duties and obligations to community and the society. Its manifestation can be seen in the inner chaos that is experienced in one's inability to live in harmony with oneself on the one hand and the social chaos that is experienced in one's inability to live in harmony with others. It also involved the environmental crisis of polluting the planet, the elimination of species and destruction of forests and vegetation. Finally there is also the metaphysical chaos arising from the experience of one's sense of separation from the rest of the Universe.

The French Revolution had promised high hopes regarding liberty, equality and fraternity. Individual liberty came with emergence and development of capitalism and equality could be found in socialism but fraternity got sandwiched somewhere. There was secular neutrality towards religious matters. Alienation became the essential feature of capitalist world order. Even Enlightenment could not fulfill any of human aspirations.

### **Modernity in India:**

There came a substantive change in India with modernity and enlightenment towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of such concepts as liberty, equality, fraternity, humanism, tolerance, democracy, scientific rationality, individualism, human rights, etc. Modernization of Indian tradition has created a great transition from 'hierarchy' to 'equality', from 'holism' to 'individuality', from 'continuity' to 'historicity' and from 'transcendence' to this worldly 'rationalism' and 'secularism'. The process of transition has however been seldom smooth and involves tensions and even social break down because of strong traditional values in India. A tradition comprises of beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people which are extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of both internal and external debates. People have either consciously adopted or uncritically accepted the education of a tradition or reflectively revised it or have made innovations in rare cases. As a matter of fact, what is ordinarily said to be 'value' in English parlance is *mūlya* obtained from *mūla* or root or source. Things have their being potentially or *dharma*. Even the basic elements of the physical world like water, fire, etc. have their *svadharma* or *mūladharma*. The *svadharma* of heat is to burn (*dāhika sakti*), to give heat (*tāpa*), etc. The *mūladharma* of human beings is to be *vyotirmaya* (luminous, bright and obviously 'fire-world'). Education and knowing are moving to the sphere of light, leaving that of darkness or ignorance behind. Knowing is a *tapasyā* for the life immortality, beyond everything which is perishable and

mortal. Education is not only truth-seeking or *value enterprise* (*sāadhanā*) but also an engagement with *virtue-realization* with the method of dialogue. In other words, to try to know is itself an act of virtue.

The distinction between 'norms' and 'facts' has never been a major concern in Indian tradition. It is essentially a western thinking especially with reference to Hume and Kant. It is because of the fact that most of the Indian systems of thought do not draw a fundamental line of demarcation between *theoretical* reason and *practical* reason as has been done by Kant. All 'reasons' are practical (in a very important way). I'll take *Samhitā* and *Mīmāṃsā* to overcome most of the dichotomies like between 'norms' and 'facts', between rationalism and empiricism and so forth. The different *Mandalas* of the *Rgveda* have been attributed to different schools and groups of intellectuals. Even *Yajurveda* is a *Samhitā* and *Charak* is a *Samhitā*. These are compilation of different views, plurality of views, diversity of ethnic groups. Pluralism is the act of philosophizing. These ought to be assumed, otherwise we cannot explain *Samhitā*. It is this diverse interaction that gives rise to compilation of *Samhitā*. There is a need to critically engage in this process and we need *Mīmāṃsā* to resolve the differences of the proliferated group of thinkers. We have *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā*, Kumarila Bhatta, who is a symbolic of a name, then *Uttara Siddhānta*, etc. These are the texts even of jurisprudence; legal disputes are settled there, hence an integral part of Indian education. Indian jurisprudence system has come from philosophy. *Mīmāṃsā* system, a grammatical philosophy, deals, not only with its grammar, but also with its epistemology. Correctly speaking, the Indian traditional thought is more concerned with *practical experience* than with *reason*. That explains why in Indian thought; there is no recognized distinction between rationalism and empiricism. The absence of cognitive dualism has facilitated in India an *applied integral approach* to all issues, including the issues of *values* and *virtues* in particular and *education* in general.

We may recall that there was a time when the whole Indian traditional system of education whether it was *Ayurveda*, or *Charakasamhitā*, or *Susrutasamhitā*, was all applied. This learning and education was a journey from disease to well-being, from darkness to light, from ephemeral to the durable, from the perishable to the imperishable. Indian traditional learning was elucidative, evocative and inspirational. It had enlightenment, attainment and accomplishment. Our education was edification, much more than erudition. As a matter of fact, learning is a delightful adventure into the world of ideas and ideals. Learning is an elevating process of self-transformation. The learned is enlightened in thought and action, in attitude and disposition, full of love for all – everything and being of this seamless universe.

### Gandhian Modernity:

The ideas of European enlightenment like freedom/independence, autonomy, sovereignty, property, maturity/adulthood, public and private, tolerance, scientific rationality, secularism, end in itself, critique of religion, humanism, democracy, Nation/State, universality of moral actions, humanity as an end, etc. have also helped Gandhi to substantiate his position on Indian modernity. Though these ideas evolved and developed in Europe, yet they proliferated beyond Europe to 'other' continents and subcontinents including India. Gandhi appreciated these ideas and like a genius, he interpreted them into indigenous concepts and principles such as Truth, Simplicity, Faith, *Brahmacharya*, *Purushārtha*, *Satyāgraha*, *Swarāj*, *Sarvodaya*, *karma*, compassion, trusteeship, vegetarianism/ fruitarianism and above all non-violence with the aim of attaining *swarāj*-victory over one's passions, lusts, greed, etc. and independence and sovereignty of the country.

Gandhi was in his middle thirties, when he became so opposed to English education that he could write about 'the rottenness of this education' and that 'to give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them that, by receiving English education, we have enslaved the nation'. He was enraged that he had to speak of Home Rule or Independence in what was clearly a foreign tongue, that he could not practice in court in his mother tongue, that all official documents were in English as were all the best newspapers and that education was carried out in English for the chosen few. He did not blame the colonial powers for this. He saw that it was quite logical that they would want elite of native Indians to become like their rulers in both manners and values. In this way, the Empire could be consolidated. Gandhi blamed his fellow Indians for accepting the situation. Later in his life he was to declare that 'real freedom will come only when we free ourselves of the domination of Western education, Western culture and Western way of living which have been ingrained in us. Emancipation from this culture would mean real freedom for us'.

Gandhi's rejection of 'modern' education or Western civilization was all encompassing. He described it as the 'Kingdom of Satan' polluting everyone it touched. Modernization in the form of industrialization, machinery, parliamentary government, the growth of the British Empire and all the things that most people regarded as progress, Gandhi rejected. In opposition to modern civilization he counter posed ancient Indian civilization with its perceived emphasis on village communities that were self-sufficient and self-governing. He was concerned with the stranglehold that Western civilization had over India. The materialistic values that the British Raj imposed on India had to be countered by the spirituality of Ancient India. Time and time again throughout his life he would return to this theme of the need to revert to what he called their 'own glorious civilization' which was far superior to anything modern society could offer.

Gandhi had not only rejected colonial education but also put forward a radical alternative. So what was this alternative? What was so radical about it? In what way did Gandhi seek to alter the symbolic meaning of 'education' and thereby to change the established structure of opportunities for education?

### Gandhian Alternative: *Nai Talim*, Handicraft versus Technology, *Swadeshi* and *Swaraj*

India's indigenous tradition of education as well as the colonial education system had emphasized the skills (such as literacy) and knowledge of which the upper castes had a monopoly. In terms of its epistemology, Gandhi's proposal intended to stand the education system on its head. The social philosophy and the curriculum of 'basic education' thus favoured the child belonging to the lowest stratum of society. "Basic education was an embodiment of Gandhi's perception of an ideal society as one consisting of small, self-reliant communities. To him, Indian villages were capable of becoming such communities; indeed, he believed that Indian villages were historically self-reliant, and the great task now was to restore their autonomy and to create the conditions necessary for economic self-sufficiency and political dignity in villages." This is how in *Nai Talim* Gandhi implied a programme of social transformation by altering the symbolic meaning of 'education' and thereby to change the established structure of opportunities for education.

For Indian minds, puzzled about modernity, I will humbly recommend a change of air. Let us leave Descartes, Kant and Hegel, Marx and Freud for a while, get out of the Enlightenment frame of mind and go for a walk. Let us expose ourselves to and think in other ways of perceiving and experiencing reality. There is no other way of detoxifying ourselves from the fumes of Enlightenment Rationality.

We should appreciate what *Brahadāranjakopnisad*, IV 3.9, says, "Standing in this intermediate condition one sees both those conditions namely being in this world and being in the other world" thus the realm of between falls at the juncture (*tamin sandhye sthāne, or ubhe sthāne*) of immanent as well as the transcendent. In a situation like this one is able to see both the "evils and joys." It is possible for man to become aware of both immanence and transcendence of evil and the good, of suffering and delight. Somewhere along the way turn your inner eye to the Luminous Transcendent, bow down before it if you can. If your inborn *hubris* or acquired pride stops you from bending, do not force yourself to bend your knees or bow your head, but just contemplate and wonder.

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- [1] <sup>i</sup> Silverman, Hugh J. (Editor) *Continental Philosophy III. Post-modernism - Philosophy and Arts*. (New York and London, Routledge, 1990), p. 1. The word 'modern' is a Latin derivation of the word 'modo' which is the same as the 'mode' or 'of the present and current in time'. Hence modern means what is 'in the present'. But the later English usage evolved another meaning which suggested a change of values, social order and even incorporated in new order of relationships, values and thinking.
- [2] <sup>ii</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 1973, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K.Smith, London, MacMillan Press Ltd. Preface.
- [3] <sup>iii</sup> Hume, D. (1739) *A Treatise of Human Nature* Book III, Part I, Section I, (London: John Noon.) p. 335. One may also consult Hudson, William Donald, *The Is/Ought Question. A Collection of Papers on the Central Problem in Moral Philosophy*, London: Macmillan, 1969.
- [4] <sup>iv</sup> Peter Berger, in his *Facing up to Modernity* (New York, 1977), suggested five phenomena characteristic of modernity: a. Abstraction, b. Futurity, c. Individualism, d. Liberation and e. Secularization.
- [5] <sup>v</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Answer to the Question: what is enlightenment*, 1783  
<http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>  
retrieved on 09/12/2018.