

## Gandhiji's Concept of Swaraj

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porbandar on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1869 and died in Delhi on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948. He is commonly regarded as one of the greatest men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An advocate of nonviolence, he nevertheless lead India's struggle against the greatest and most powerful empire in human history. That is why; he has been called the Father of the Nation and given the title “Mahatma” or great soul. No retailing of his life can be as effective as reading it in his own words in his autobiography “*The story of My Experiments with Truth*”.

No doubt the word experiment in Gandhi's autobiography need not be seen as with scientific precision. But its drift is similar. In other words, Gandhiji's life was lived according to certain assumptions and in order to demonstrate certain results. It is up to us to find out how strictly conducted this experiment was and how successful its results.

Gandhiji's life is a story. It is not a record of data. It is full of richly subjective detailing and narration. Gandhi is not superhuman per say, but superbly human. He rises higher and higher through endless striving and discipline. He is not born superior to us. In fact, He has the same feelings and weaknesses as that of the rest of us but it is his struggle against these weaknesses that makes him shine as beacon of hope and the leader of millions.

After his early schooling in Rajkot, and marriage to Kasturba in 1883, Gandhi left for England in 1888 to study law. After qualifying for the Bar in 1891, he came back to India but found no satisfactory work. He, therefore, set sail to South Africa in 1893 to take up his practice as a lawyer. South Africa, then though, a part of British Empire, suffered from several racial discrimination. Gandhi, soon became involved in a struggle for justice for the entire Indian population. However, the turning point was his being thrown out of the first-class compartment of

a train in 1893 even though he possessed a valid ticket. The incident opened his eyes to the extent of the injustice prevalent in South Africa.

During the South African years, Gandhi experimented with all the major qualities of his philosophy. The South African years were literally the years of the making of the Mahatma, years of self-formation. It was during this period that Gandhi discovered his personal and political philosophy and hardly deviated from it for the rest of his life. And it was during this period that *Hindu Swaraj* came to be written.

*Hindi Swaraj* is one of the most important books that Gandhi wrote. It was originally written in Gujarati and published in *Indian Opinion* a journal that Gandhi used to edit in South Africa. The manuscript was written in 1909 on the deck of S. s. Kildare, the ship which was bringing Gandhi back to South Africa from London. It was written just in 10 days. The manuscript was later translated into English for the benefit of Gandhiji's English friends. It was published as a booklet in Gujarati, but immediately banned by the government of the Bombay presidency. Its English translation was published in book form in 1910.

The message of *Hindi Swaraj*, Gandhi says "It teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It pits soul force against the brute force. Gandhiji's contact with Vinayak Savarkar provoked him to write this book with so much passion. While in London, Gandhi met in his own words, every known anarchist. Among these was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the leading person of the extremist group and later of the Hindu Mahasabha. Savarkar was a brave and patriotic man who wished to overthrow British rule through violent revolution. His study of world history had convinced Savarkar that no country had won its freedom without an armed insurrection. Savarkar was therefore, working to train a band of Indian terrorists in England. With the help of Shyamji Krishna Varma, Savarkar had instituted a scholarship for Indian students in Britain but his object was to prepare the leaders for violent revolt.

It was in one such meeting in London that Gandhi made Savarkar. Gandhi and Savarkar had detailed discussion over the means and the aims of the struggle for India's freedom but could not come on an agreement. Gandhi, unlike Savarkar, was convinced that it was India's unique genius and destiny not to imitate the other nations of the world and that India indeed would win its freedom through moral and spiritual force, which was superior to material force or the force of arms. Gandhi wrote *Hindi Swaraj* to explain his point of view.

*Hindi Swaraj* is written as a dialogue between an editor and a reader. The editor is none other than Gandhi himself, while the reader is a prototype of the kind of angry young man that Gandhi met in London and wished to change. Gandhi adopts the dialogic mode because he wanted to write a book which can be put into the hands of a child. Indeed, this studied simplicity went on to be the hallmark of Gandhiji style, not just in his writing, but in all that he did in life.

Gandhi, though a ceaseless innovator, was also a traditionalist. The dialogue form reminds us at once of the *Upanishadic* and Socratic tradition. Gandhi thus, uses a tried and tested form to

convey his thoughts. *Hindi Swaraj* is made-up of 20 little chapters where Gandhi explains his concept of Swaraj.

In the first chapter, “The Congress and its officials”, Gandhi says that all people should respect the Congressman like Hume, Wedderburn, Naoroji and Gokhale for laying the foundation of Indian home rule or Swaraj. He argues against hating every Englishman just because they rule India. He expects, we who seek justice will have to do justice to others.

In the chapter, “Partition of Bengal”, the editor says that the real awakening of India took place with the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon. The partition taught Indians that petitions must be backed up by force and that they must be capable of suffering. The partition also divided the Congress into two factions: the moderates and the extremists.

In Chapter three, “Discontent and Unrest”, Gandhiji analyses how reforms take place. According to him, every reform must be preceded by discontent. Gandhi tries to define his idea of Swaraj in this chapter. He makes it clear that Swaraj is not merely independence, but a different form of government altogether. Swaraj is not just the withdrawal of the British rule. It is actually English rule without the Englishman.

In Chapter five, “The Condition of England”, Gandhi argues that the condition of Europe is not worth copying. The mother of Parliament is like a sterile woman and a prostitute. If India copies England, she will be ruined. The pitiable condition of England is due to modern civilization under which the nations of Europe are becoming degraded and ruined day by day.

In chapter six, “Civilization”, Gandhiji says that just material well-being is not the mark of civilization. He clarifies modern civilization is not just purely material; it is also immoral and irreligious. Modern civilization enslaves people with the luxuries that money can offer.

In Chapter seven, “Why was India lost?” Gandhi says that the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. We must not blame others, but scrutinize and correct our own weaknesses. The English wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods.

The chapters from eight to twelve are all titled as “The Conditions of India”. Here, Gandhiji has described the different aspects regarding the situation of India in chapter eight. He opines “India is ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization.” He says, we are turning away from God. India’s suffering is due to our turning away from a religious life and accepting modern civilization. In Chapter nine, he speaks about railways. According to him, the railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country. Railways help to spread all sorts of evil, because while good requires a long time to travel, evil has wings. It was the British who perpetuated the myth of divided India. Before their advent, India was one culturally. In chapter ten, titled “The Hindu and Mohammedan”, Gandhi remarks that we are not divided previously. India is one nation because it has the faculty of assimilation. Hindus and Muslims are blood brothers and must learn to co-exist. In Chapter eleven, he speaks about the profession of lawyer. According to him, lawyers are often immoral because their profession thrives on quarrels and disputes. The British also use law courts to strengthen their illegal, illegitimate rule. In

chapter twelve, he speaks about the profession of doctor. He states that the medical profession has aided imperialism. Most diseases are caused by lack of discipline and by indulgence, which is encouraged through medication. Modern medicine is cruel because it vivisections animals. Doctors use their profession not to help people, but to make money.

Chapter thirteen is “What is True Civilization?” According to Gandhi, civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. In this sense, India has nothing to learn from anyone else. The tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality.

In chapter fourteen, Gandhi speaks about how India can become free. He views “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.” Only by freeing ourselves first can we dream of freeing others. India strength is unique. Instead of Europeanization ourselves, we can Indianize the British.

In chapter fifteen, he speaks about Italy and India. He says, unlike Italy, India cannot easily rise up in armed rebellion. Moreover, to arm India on a large scale is to Europeanize it. If assassination, terrorism and violence is used to free India, we will make this holy land unholy.

In chapter sixteen, he speaks about ‘brute force.’ The reader here argues in favour of brute force, of obtaining the right end through whatever means. The editor replies that there is the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. We reap exactly as we sow. The force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. The petition, which is not backed by force, is admittedly useless, but instead of being baked by brute force, it should be baked by law, force, soul, force, or more popularly but less accurately, passive resistance.

Gandhiji clarifies the concept of ‘passive resistance’ in chapter seventeen. Here, the reader asks what historical evidence there is to prove that passive resistance works. The editor replies by defining history not as a record of wars and that of reigns of kings, but as the story of humanity. The fact that the world lives on in spite of wars proves that the force of love is greater than the force of hatred and violence. Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering. According to Gandhiji, passive resistance is not the weapon of the weak, but actually it requires more courage than the use of brute force. He asks, “Is it harder to kill others or smilingly to die for one's beliefs?” Passive resistance is for everyone, men and women, those weak in the body and those who are strong, singly or jointly. Passive resistance blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. Passive resistance is an Indian speciality because the common people of India have always used it down the ages. We cease to cooperate with our rulers when they displease us. This does not mean that we neglect our duties. It is our duty to make bodies strong too. Passive resistance can be perfected only through the practice of chastity, truth and fearlessness.

In chapter eighteen, “Education”, Gandhiji opines that education is not merely the acquisition of letters, but the building of character. English education has enslaved the nation. Though valuable English books may be translated into our languages, religious or ethical education should take first place. Hindus should learn Sanskrit, Muslim, Persian or Arabic and

vice versa too. Northerners and Westerners should learn Tamil. The national language should be Hindi. Religious education should not be left in the hands of the hypocritical clergy alone, but should be an instrument of driving out Western civilization.

In the chapter “Machinery” For Gandhi the use of machinery, or rather the use by Indians of machine-made goods, has enslaved us. Capitalism is aligned to imperialism. Both oppress the common man. Though machine-made products cannot be given up all at once, we must make a beginning without waiting for the world to change. Gandhi further says, “Machinery is bad. We must keep this in mind even when we use it against itself.”

In the last chapter “Conclusion”, Gandhiji opines that moderates and extremists must join hands to work for Swaraj. The English must be asked to stop exploiting India. They cannot rule us against our will. Indians, in order to be free, must reform and discipline themselves. We must avoid the English language. Lawyers and doctors must use their knowledge for the benefits of others. European civilization must be resisted at every step, even at the cost of personal sacrifice and suffering. All must start the use of the handloom. Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control. The way to achieve it is passive resistance, that is, soul-force or love-force. In order to exert this force, Swadeshi in every sense is necessary. At last Gandhi says, “I bear no enmity towards the English, but I do toward their civilization.”

*Hindi Swaraj* is a seminal text for all those who wish to understand Gandhi. Today, we are rather under the impact of modernity and westernization. The various means of mass-media have entangled us into self-destructive lifestyles of consumerism. To change this, we require the kind of jolt or shock that *Hindi swaraj* offers. Apparently, the text seems to give a political message. But if some delves into the core of the text, it is noticed that it extends much beyond its immediate political message, which concerns the achievement of Swaraj and the best means thereof. Gandhi clearly says that Swaraj obtained by violence will be no Swaraj at all, but will demean us to the level of our former colonizers. Gandhiji's concern are not merely political. In Gandhian thought, what helps us attain political independence should also help us develop spiritually.

Gandhiji's thought springs from a deep perspective. He identifies India as a spiritual and religious civilization whose culture is superior to that of modern Western civilization. Here, Gandhi makes a crucial point that Western civilization today is merely modern civilization. At one time, before the onset of modernity, Europe was not much different from India. And it is not in favour of modern civilization. He condemns it not only because it is materialistic, but because it is essentially immoral. It encourages vice and makes us forget the purpose of life, which is the cultivation of virtue. Modern life regards the human being as essentially a physical entity, the aim of whose life is to accumulate comforts. In order to give us the comforts, modern civilization adopts deconstructive approach to nature. All the progress and development, that is achieved, is at the cost of enormous damage to our environment. The whole world today speaks of protecting the environment. That is because the Earth is, as an ecosystem has reached, a crisis of survival. Gandhi was a visionary who could foresee this crisis very clearly. He warns all of us against it.

He calls on us to change our attitude and our lifestyles. It is up to us how much we can understand him and follow his examples.

Modern civilization is characterized with exploitation and colonialism. The other way in which much of what we call modern development happens is through the exploitation of human beings. Slavery, colonialism, indentured labour, and other forced or ill-paid system have been evolved so that the majority of the poor toil for the comforts of the rich few. Greed for money, lust for power, urge to demonstrate over the others are the characteristic features that we find in modernity. If all of us succumbed to the craze for modernity, the whole species would be dehumanized. Gandhi recognizes this and therefore criticizes the West, which is the custodian of modernity.

He wants Indians to regain their lost pride in themselves and their culture, which he believes is superior to that of the modern West. That is because traditional Indian culture, at its best, was designated to ensure the moral and spiritual evaluation of each of its members. Gandhi wants modern Indians to get rid of the colonial mentality which makes up worship everything that comes from the West. The so-called backwardness of traditional India, according to Gandhi, was no backwardness at all, but the proof of its higher culture.

Gandhi considers the craze for machinery to be inappropriate to India as it creates the problem of unemployment in the country like India where we have a surplus of labour. It will dehumanize and enslave those who are bound to machines in lifeless routines. It will concentrate the wealth in the hands of those few who own machines. Instead of so much centralization of power and wealth, Gandhi advocates decentralization. Each one must attempt to attain self-sufficiency. We should become both producers and consumers.

Self-sufficiency, self-respect, self-realization are thus, the main principles of Gandhiji's idea of Swaraj. Swaraj itself is a concept which is deeper and wider than independence. Swaraj is a Vedic word which means more than just self-rule. It suggests not just individual autonomy but a very high level of moral and spiritual development. Such as Swaraj is a lifelong project and includes every aspect of our lives, it embraces all of humankind, both the oppressed and oppressor. Political independence is merely the beginning. Swaraj will be impossible before the whole world learns to coexist in peace and prosperity. It will be a world without the inequalities, poverty, disease and warfare of today.

*Hindi Swaraj* is an impractical text when it is observed from a limited perspective. When seen from a broader perspective, what it advocates seems to be the only possible way to survive.