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## UNIT 2 GANDHI'S CONCEPTION OF MODERN CIVILIZATION AND ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY\*

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Mahatma Gandhi was a mass leader and his beliefs affected generations to come. As such it is a good idea to attain a sense of civilization as he perceived it. In his mind he was very clear as to the differences between the Western civilization and the Indian civilization. He was a strong critic of the western mode of living and sense of morality. He did not believe that the scientific and technological advancement by the West constituted progress. Most of the words and symbols Gandhi invented and used in his long political and philosophical struggle against the British and the Western materialism were symbols of Indian tradition on the one hand and a critique of modern Western civilization on the other. These words and symbols have more than one meaning. They also present multiple messages and the most important among them was a critique of modernity. These essentially Indian words and symbols were used by Gandhi as critiques of and to counter the three important concepts of nationalism, industrialism and western education, which form the very core of modernity in India. All these suggest that Gandhi refused to accept 'modern civilization' which he designated and described as 'Western civilization' and most of the values it stood for. He actively countered them with words, symbols, concepts, traditions, values and in all, the very philosophy which is essentially Indian.

#### *Aims and Objectives*

This unit will enable you to understand

- Gandhi's ideas and perspectives on modern western and Indian civilizations.
- His critique of industrialization and mechanization.
- His use of Indian symbols like Khadi to counter modern civilization.
- His ideas of education that best suited India.

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## 2.2 GANDHI'S IDEA OF CIVILIZATION

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Gandhi explained in detail his ideas and concepts of civilization, positive and negative features of Western civilization i.e., modern civilization, and comparison and contrast between Indian and Western civilizations in many speeches and writings especially in *Hind Swaraj* which he wrote in Gujarati in 1909 on his return voyage from London to South Africa. It came out in two installments in the same year in the Gujarati edition of *Indian Opinion*, the weekly published by Gandhi in South Africa. It was issued as a booklet in Gujarati in 1910 and was banned by the British authorities on the charges of seditious content. Undaunted by this move of the imperial authorities, Gandhi later developed the ideas he expressed in *Hind Swaraj* further and enriched them by new contributions throughout his life. His views emanated mainly from his reaction to events and his attempt to give encouragement to many social reforms and political movements. A uniformity existed in his thoughts and this uniformity in Gandhi's thoughts arose from a moral approach and a desire to lead active and creative life not for the sake of himself but for the sake of his countrymen.

Gandhi regarded violence un-Indian, something alien to Indian civilization and he makes his opinions amply clear in *Hind Swaraj*. In a sense, the aim of *Hind Swaraj* was to confront the anarchist and violence-prone Indian nationalism with an alternative to violence derived from Gandhi's earliest experiments with *Satyagraha*. Gandhi mentioned that *Hind Swaraj* was written in order to show that his countrymen were following a suicidal policy of violence, and that if they look back to their own glorious civilization, either the English would adopt the latter and become Indianized or lose their interest in controlling India. Furthermore, in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi depicted 'the dichotomy between the spiritual, moral superiority of Indian society, and the violent, politically corrupt nature of European states'. While condemning the 'brute force' of Western power, Gandhi distanced himself from the militant nationalists because they supported violence which he considered a suicidal strategy as it would provoke 'organized violence' by the ruling authority.

*Hind Swaraj* was a detailed commentary on Western civilization that thrived on material power.

**In the *Hind Swaraj*, he launched an attack on every aspect of western civilization in order to prove how evil and how harmful it was. The text also contains Gandhi's alternative to modern civilisation and a programme of action and behaviour that Indians must follow to make that alternative a reality. Gandhi equated modern civilization with the western one because the west was the principal site of all that is considered modern. What he actually attacked was a particular form of western civilisation, the one that emerged with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.**

According to Gandhi, modern Western civilization is characterized by the many negative features like greed, aggression, colonialism, imperialism, war technology, inequity, exploitation, poverty, extravagance and luxury, bodily comforts, unbridled individualism and vulgar materialism, immorality, valueless and commercial education, alienation and so on. These were thoroughly criticized by Gandhi. Before explaining these features in detail and their impact on social, economic, political and moral aspects of modern human life, and Gandhi's overall

critique of Western civilization scattered throughout his extensive works, it is better to know what Gandhi meant by civilization -both Western and Indian himself. According to Gandhi, "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."<sup>11</sup>

In the chapter titled "Civilization" in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi provided an elaborate explanation about his ideas on modern (western) civilization. He elaborated as to what state of things is described by the word 'civilization'. He writes, "Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life. The people of Europe today live in better-build 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. Formerly, they wore skins, and used spears as their weapons. Now, they wear long trousers, and, for embellishing their bodies, they wear a variety of dresses and instead of spears, they carry with them revolvers containing five or more chambers. If people of a certain country, who have hitherto not been in the habit of wearing much clothing, boots, etc., adopt European clothing, they are supposed to have become civilized out of savagery. Formerly, in Europe, people ploughed their lands mainly by manual labour. Now, one man can plough a vast tract by means of steam engines and can thus amass great wealth. This is called a sign of civilization. Formerly, only a few men wrote valuable books. Now, anybody writes and prints anything he likes and poisons people's minds. Formerly, men travelled in wagons. Now, they fly through the air, in trains at the rate of four hundred and more miles per day. This is considered the height of civilization. It has been stated that, as men progress, they shall be able to travel in airship and reach any part, of the world in a few hours. Men will not need the use of their hands and feet. They will press a button, and they will have their clothing by their side. They will press another button, and they will have their newspaper. A third, and a motor-car will be in waiting for them. They will have a variety of delicately dished up food. Everything will be done by machinery. Formerly, when people wanted to fight with one another, they measured between them their bodily strength; now it is possible to take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun from a hill. This is civilization. Formerly, men worked in the open air only as much as they liked. Now thousands of workmen meet together and for the sake of maintenance work in factories or mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts. They are obliged to work, at the risk of their lives, at most dangerous occupations, for the sake of millionaires. Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion. Now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy. There are now diseases of which people never dreamt before, and an army of doctors is engaged in finding out their cures, and so hospitals have increased. This is a test of civilization. Formerly, special messengers were required and much expense was incurred in order to send letters; today, anyone can abuse his fellow by means of a letter for one penny. True, at the same cost, one can send one's thanks also. Formerly, people had two or three meals consisting of home-made bread and vegetables; now, they require something to eat every two hours so that they have hardly leisure for anything else. This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion. This civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so. This civilization is irreligion, and it has taken such a hold on the people in Europe that those who are in it appear to be half mad. This civilization is such that one has only to be patient

and it will be self-destroyed. According to the teaching of Mohammed this would be considered a Satanic Civilization. Hinduism calls it a Black Age.”<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi greatly admired and hence greatly glorified the Indian civilization. But, while admiring the Indian civilization, Gandhi was not unaware of the fact that India of his days was not exactly like he described it. He was quite aware of the darker side of the Indian society and the social evils prevalent in it-child marriage, child widows, teenaged mothers, sati, not allowing widows to re-marry, denying education to women and girls, female infanticide, polyandry, existence of the practice of Niyoga, where, girls dedicate themselves to prostitution in the name of religion, goats and sheep killed in the name of religion, untouchability. He candidly regarded those defects as defects. He declared that nobody mistook evils of Indian civilization for ancient civilization. He recognized the attempts that have always been made in the past to remove those evils and believed that such attempts would be made to remove them in future too. He admitted that Indian civilization too like other civilizations was not perfect in every sense, but according to him Indian civilization has a tendency to elevate the moral being, and the Western civilization propagates immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God. Gandhi declared that ‘India is unique. Its strength is immeasurable’.<sup>13</sup> He also draws our attention to the historical fact that when other civilizations succumbed, the Indian civilization has survived many shocks. Gandhi himself worked tirelessly throughout his life against various social evils prevalent in the Indian society especially untouchability and called the untouchables ‘children of God’ or ‘harijans’.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss Gandhi’s idea of civilization

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### **2.3 MODERN CIVILIZATION AND LOSS OF INDIA’S FREEDOM**

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Gandhi opined that Indians distancing themselves from their civilization which was essentially spiritual and, instead, moving towards the material richness on which the Western civilization was based on was the inner and fundamental cause for India losing its freedom. He condemns the fratricidal attitude of Indian princes that gave an opportunity for the British to enhance their military presence here. He also cites the animosity between Hindus and the Muslims of India who were at daggers drawn at each other, also as a potential opportunity the East India Company got and thus the Indians created the circumstances that gave the Company its control over India. And Gandhi concludes that, “hence it is truer to say that we gave India to the English than that India was lost.”<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi was of the strong opinion that when Indians would realize the greatness of their civilization and take to their ancient roots they would be able to shed the disease of slavery. This was because he believed it was a period of weakness that Indian civilization went through that allowed the British to take control of India. Gandhi believed that the British had introduced the modern railways, telegraph, western education, professions of lawyers and doctors etc. not to benefit the Indians but to further impoverish them.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Critically evaluate Gandhi's arguments against modern civilization.

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## 2.4 CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION AND MECHANIZATION

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Gandhi believed that industrialization had given rise to a violent concept of nationalism in the West. According to him industrialization had divided the society into haves and have-nots and created not only economic inequality but also brought about moral deprivation such as greed and enslavement of the working class. Gandhi's critique is directed at the heart of the urban industrial vision. His condemnation of Western civilization was based on the roots of this civilization-Machine. It was the domination of Machine, the root cause of the malaise that afflicted India. According to him it was machine that has impoverished India. As such the concept of 'Khadi' or the spinning of cotton yarn on wooden charkhas was adopted by Gandhi not only as a weapon against western industrialization but also to promote the concept of 'Swaraj' and 'swadeshi'. He vociferously opined that when Indian people wore and took up things made indigenously everyone would gain pride in our lost civilization. Earlier saints like Kabir had propagated this idea through their rustic songs.

Gandhi declared in unequivocal terms that his Swadeshi chiefly centered on the hand-spun Khaddar and extended to everything that could be and is produced in India. In this sense, Khadi was reversion to that glorious civilization which India had nurtured before the Europeans arrived. During the years of his withdrawal from active politics in mid-1920s, Gandhi devoted himself to the propagation of Khadi turning it into a cult, as a strategy of nation-building from the grassroots. He suggested a Khadi franchise for the organization and even envisaged a "yarn currency."<sup>15</sup> Gandhi's almost emotional attachment to the spinning wheel should have baffled both the British and Western educated town-bred Indians. It was obvious as they were unable to grasp the incredible poverty of Indian villages.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss Gandhi’s critique of industrialization and mechanization.

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**2.5 EDUCATION AS CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY**

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Basic education was arguably the most important arena for the introduction of modernity in India. Designed as it was by the colonial masters, besides remaining generally detached from Indian tradition, it was also oblivious to the needs and problems of the teeming millions in the countryside. Gandhi’s basic education scheme was primarily a system of rural education and handicrafts constituted the medium of instruction. Spinning and weaving was Gandhi’s preference among the crafts and so his entire pedagogy and educational philosophy was intermeshed with his khadi-based approach to life.

Gandhi was critical of the Western system of education for much of what it stood for. He felt that it was wholly unsuited to India’s needs, and was a bad copy of the Western model. He further said that the then education system had, by reason of the medium of instruction being a foreign language, sapped the energy of the youths who had passed through our schools and colleges and had produced an army of clerks and office-seekers. He was of strong opinion that it had dried up all originality, impoverished the vernaculars and had deprived the masses of the benefit of higher knowledge which would otherwise have percolated through the intercourse of the education classes with them. This education system created a gulf between educated India and the masses; it stimulated the brain but starved the spirit for want of a religious basis for education and emaciated the body for want of training in handicrafts. He alleged that this system criminally neglected the greatest need of agricultural training.

Gandhi would have sounded as quite harsh and radical to the educated Indians as he castigated their educational training and their values and told them they were traitors to their motherland by being willing victims of the education system in vogue. It is an interesting fact that, despite their opposition to British rule, most of the nationalists did not reject the British rule. At the same time most other nationalists did not reject the British system of education outright, since they viewed it as a means by which India could become a materially advanced nation. Gandhi, however, thought differently from the beginning of his political career. He wanted to make education self-supporting, train the bodies of the children as well as their minds and pave the way for a complete boycott of foreign yarn and cloth. Moreover, the children thus equipped will become self-reliant and independent.<sup>16</sup>

## Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.
- 1) Discuss Gandhi's critique of modern education.

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## 2.6 SUMMARY

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## 2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## 2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) The multiple influence on Gandhi both from the Western (Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin) and Indian (Hinduism, Buddhism and Jain philosophy) requires discussion.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Western/modernist mode of development privileges the fulfillment of bodily (material) needs. This point needs elaboration.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) The deepening of inequality, increased alienation and environmental decay

### Check Your Progress Exercise 4

It is not correct to conclude that Gandhi was against all the currents of modern civilization and that he wanted to return to the past, essentially Indian. Often he made an exaggerated attack on modern civilization for its ills. As far as the social organization was concerned, Gandhi was a religious and social reformer. He fought against such practices as hereditary priesthood, untouchability against the so called low castes and the denial of entry to temples to them. He conducted many campaigns, based on social equality and scientific spirit for the cause of these social reforms. The socio-economic changes that took place in Gandhi's times and later in India and the emergence of new social classes helped the popularization of modern ideas which Gandhi tried to spread in his times. With regard to the negation of violence and the prospects of conducting social and political movement, Gandhi was ahead of his times and was referred as the "Prophet of the Atomic Era."

Gandhi's concept of modernity and civilization revolved around the concepts of:-

- a) Swaraj- Swaraj means self-governance or self-rule. He described his idea of an ideal socio-economic order in the words: "Independence must begin at the bottom, thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers." The focus was on political decentralization.
- b) Swadeshi- Swadeshi according to Gandhi simply meant using one's own country made local goods. Gandhi also gave an economic, political and social dimension to the term 'swadeshi' and used it as a weapon against the British rule.
- c) Ahimsa- Ahimsa or non-violence to Gandhi was essential and hence he also criticized Western civilization on the grounds that it promoted violence.



- d) Khadi- *Khadi* according to Gandhi evoked memories of India's great past before the British mills drove weavers out of business and onto impoverished farms. *Khadi* thus served as an appropriate example of independence and identity.

Gandhi was critical of pursuit of materialism, opposed machines and centralization of production, and favoured, on the contrary, a life of labour for everyone in the society, concisely contained in his concept of 'bread-labour'. He believed in the ideal of economic self-sufficiency of the villages. The modernity that Gandhi foresaw for India was that of a spiritual ascendancy and strong moral values. He believed all Indians should respect and be large hearted enough to accept human beings with virtues and flaws. Modernity according to him was never an accumulation of goods and commodities but the gathering of values which took a person closer to '*parameshwar*' (God) which was the most significant of all truths.

There were occasions when Gandhi remarked on modern western civilization being yet 'a good idea.' He was not against modern civilization in total, but had a deep suspicion of the material progress in the West and in concept of modernity. He was aware that there were elements in modern civilization, like democratic political philosophy, that could be useful to India. In the preface to the English edition of *Hind Swaraj*, he even urged his countrymen to adopt such positive aspects of modern civilization to drive out the English

