

MAHATMA GANDHI AND HIND SWARAJ: A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF MODERN CIVILIZATION AND THE VISION OF TRUE FREEDOM

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Abstract

This research article examines Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) as a foundational text of modern Indian political and ethical thought. It argues that the work is not merely a nationalist tract but a profound civilizational critique of modernity, industrialism, and colonialism. Gandhi's conception of swaraj is interpreted as an ethical and spiritual ideal rooted in self-discipline rather than mere political independence. The article further explores Gandhi's critique of Western civilization, his insistence on the unity of means and ends, and his formulation of satyagraha as a moral force. Drawing upon critical interpretations by scholars such as Anthony J. Parel and Bhikhu Parekh, the study situates *Hind Swaraj* within a broader philosophical discourse, highlighting its continuing relevance in contemporary debates on development, sustainability, and ethical politics.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Swaraj, Satyagraha, Modern Civilization, Indian Nationalism, Ethical Politics, Non-violence, Self-rule

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909 during his return voyage from England to South Africa, stands as one of the most radical and original critiques of modern civilization in the twentieth century. Cast in the form of a dialogue between the "Editor" and the "Reader," the text interrogates the assumptions underlying Indian nationalism while simultaneously challenging the ideological foundations of Western modernity. Gandhi's central argument is that political independence without moral regeneration would be hollow, and that true swaraj must arise from self-mastery rather than the mere transfer of power. As he famously declares, "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves" (M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Navajivan Publishing House, 1938, p. 67). This definition transforms the concept of freedom from a political demand into an ethical discipline, placing responsibility upon the individual rather than the state.

Gandhi's critique of modern civilization is perhaps the most striking and controversial aspect of *Hind Swaraj*. He does not merely oppose British rule; rather, he challenges the entire edifice of industrial modernity, which he sees as rooted in materialism, competition, and moral decay. "Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants" (*Hind Swaraj*, p. 59). This statement encapsulates Gandhi's vision of a society grounded in restraint and simplicity, as opposed to the endless pursuit of consumption that characterizes modern economies. The institutions of modern life—railways, law courts, and hospitals—are subjected to severe scrutiny, not because Gandhi denies their utility, but because he perceives them as instruments that often reinforce dependence and moral weakness. In this respect, Gandhi's thought anticipates later critiques of development and consumerism, positioning him as a precursor to contemporary ecological and ethical discourse.

The redefinition of swaraj in *Hind Swaraj* is inseparable from Gandhi's understanding of the relationship between means and ends. He rejects the Machiavellian notion that ends justify means, insisting instead on their intrinsic unity. "Means are after all everything. As the means so the end" (M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 88). This principle forms the ethical foundation of his political philosophy, ensuring that the pursuit of freedom does not replicate the violence and coercion it seeks to overcome. For Gandhi, the legitimacy of a political movement depends not only on its goals but also on the moral integrity of its methods. This insistence on ethical consistency distinguishes Gandhi from many contemporary

nationalist leaders and aligns his thought with broader philosophical traditions that emphasize virtue and self-discipline.

Satyagraha, or the force of truth, emerges in *Hind Swaraj* as the practical expression of Gandhi's ethical vision. Unlike passive resistance, which may be motivated by expediency, satyagraha is rooted in a deep commitment to truth and non-violence. It requires the individual to confront injustice through self-suffering rather than aggression, thereby appealing to the conscience of the oppressor. Anthony J. Parel, in *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, observes that Gandhi's method represents "a moralization of politics in which power is redefined as the capacity for self-restraint and ethical persuasion" (Parel, p. 142). This redefinition challenges conventional notions of political power, suggesting that true strength lies not in domination but in moral courage. Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence also reflects his broader metaphysical belief in the unity of life, where harm to another is ultimately harm to oneself.

Scholarly interpretations of *Hind Swaraj* have highlighted its complexity and enduring relevance. Bhikhu Parekh, in his influential work *Gandhi*, notes that Gandhi's critique of modern civilization is not a rejection of progress per se, but an attempt to redefine it in moral terms: "Gandhi did not reject modern civilization because it was modern, but because it was morally impoverished" (Parekh, p. 98). This distinction is crucial, for it reveals Gandhi as a thinker who seeks to construct an alternative modernity rather than retreat into the past. Similarly, B. R. Nanda, in *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*, emphasizes the transformative impact of *Hind Swaraj* on Gandhi's subsequent political career, describing it as "the seed-bed of his ideas on non-violence, swaraj, and the critique of Western civilization" (Nanda, p. 112). These interpretations underscore the text's significance not only as a historical document but also as a living philosophical resource.

At the same time, *Hind Swaraj* has provoked criticism for its apparent idealism and its skepticism toward industrialization. Critics have argued that Gandhi's vision is impractical in a world driven by technological advancement and economic competition. Yet such critiques often overlook the normative dimension of his argument, which is less concerned with feasibility than with ethical orientation. Gandhi's purpose is not to provide a detailed blueprint for modern society but to articulate principles that can guide human action in a morally responsible direction. As Judith Brown remarks in *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, "Hind Swaraj remains a challenge rather than a program, a moral compass rather than a political manual" (Brown, p. 56). This characterization captures the enduring power of Gandhi's thought, which continues to inspire reflection and debate across diverse contexts.

In conclusion, *Hind Swaraj* stands as a seminal text that transcends its immediate historical context to address universal questions about freedom, civilization, and human values. Gandhi's critique of modernity, his redefinition of swaraj, and his formulation of satyagraha together constitute a coherent and compelling vision of ethical politics. By insisting on the primacy of self-discipline and moral responsibility, Gandhi challenges us to rethink the foundations of political life and to seek forms of freedom that are both just and sustainable. In an age marked by ecological crises, social inequalities, and moral uncertainty, the insights of *Hind Swaraj* remain not only relevant but urgently necessary, inviting us to reconsider the meaning of progress and the true nature of human flourishing.

A further dimension of *Hind Swaraj* that merits careful attention is Gandhi's critique of representative politics and parliamentary democracy, which he regarded with deep suspicion. Contrary to the dominant nationalist aspiration to replicate British parliamentary institutions in India, Gandhi dismisses the British Parliament as "a sterile woman and a prostitute" (M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Navajivan Publishing House, 1938, p. 27), a deliberately provocative metaphor intended to expose what he perceived as the moral vacuity and instability of party politics. For Gandhi, parliamentary systems were driven not by truth or ethical conviction but by shifting majorities, vested interests, and opportunistic alliances. Such a system, he believed, could not serve as the foundation of genuine swaraj, because it lacked the moral autonomy and self-discipline that he considered essential for true freedom. Instead of external political machinery, Gandhi emphasized the primacy of internal self-

regulation, where individuals governed themselves according to dharma rather than relying on impersonal institutions.

This critique of parliamentary democracy is closely linked to Gandhi's broader vision of decentralized political organization. In *Hind Swaraj*, he advocates a return to village-based self-sufficiency, where small, self-regulating communities function as the basic units of political and economic life. This vision is not merely nostalgic but deeply philosophical, grounded in the belief that ethical life can only flourish in intimate, self-aware communities. As he later elaborates in *Young India*, "Real swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when abused" (*Young India*, 1921, p. 403). The emphasis here is not on centralization of power but on the diffusion of moral agency across the entire population. Such a conception anticipates later theories of participatory democracy and grassroots governance, suggesting that Gandhi's thought remains relevant to contemporary political theory.

Equally significant is Gandhi's engagement with the question of education, which he saw as a crucial instrument in the realization of swaraj. In *Hind Swaraj*, he criticizes the colonial education system for alienating Indians from their own cultural roots and for promoting a purely utilitarian and materialistic outlook. English education, he argues, has created "a class of clerks and interpreters" who are disconnected from the life of the masses (*Hind Swaraj*, p. 34). This critique resonates with later postcolonial analyses of education as a tool of cultural domination. Gandhi's alternative vision, which he would later develop into the concept of *Nai Talim*, emphasizes the integration of intellectual, moral, and manual training, thereby restoring dignity to labor and fostering a holistic development of the individual. As Krishna Kumar observes in *Political Agenda of Education*, Gandhi's educational philosophy represents "an attempt to harmonize knowledge with life, and learning with ethical responsibility" (Kumar, p. 76).

Another important aspect of *Hind Swaraj* is Gandhi's insistence on the ethical unity of religion and politics. Unlike modern secular frameworks that seek to separate the two, Gandhi argues that politics without religion—that is, without moral grounding—is inherently corrupt. However, his understanding of religion is not sectarian but universal, rooted in the pursuit of truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). In this sense, religion becomes the ethical foundation of political action rather than a source of division. Raghavan Iyer, in *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, notes that for Gandhi, "religion is not dogma but a quest for truth that informs every aspect of human life, including politics" (Iyer, p. 214). This integration of ethics and politics distinguishes Gandhi's thought from both Western liberalism and revolutionary ideologies, offering instead a model of political engagement grounded in spiritual values.

Furthermore, *Hind Swaraj* reflects Gandhi's deep concern with the moral consequences of economic organization. He rejects the capitalist model of industrial production, which he associates with exploitation, inequality, and the dehumanization of labor. At the same time, he is equally critical of violent revolutionary alternatives that seek to overthrow capitalism through coercion. Gandhi's economic vision, though not fully developed in *Hind Swaraj*, is implicitly based on principles of trusteeship, self-sufficiency, and ethical restraint. As J. C. Kumarappa later elaborates in *Economy of Permanence*, Gandhi's economics is "an economics of human dignity, where production is subordinated to moral values rather than profit" (Kumarappa, p. 45). This perspective challenges both capitalist and socialist paradigms, proposing instead a moral economy rooted in sustainability and social justice.

In extending the argument of *Hind Swaraj*, it becomes evident that Gandhi's thought cannot be confined to the historical context of India's freedom struggle. Rather, it represents a comprehensive philosophical framework that addresses fundamental questions about human existence, social organization, and ethical responsibility. The text's critique of modern civilization, its redefinition of swaraj, and its emphasis on moral self-discipline together constitute a vision that is at once deeply rooted in Indian traditions and profoundly universal in its implications. As Dennis Dalton observes in *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, "Hind Swaraj is less a political manifesto than a

moral philosophy that challenges the very assumptions of modern life” (Dalton, p. 63). This insight underscores the enduring relevance of Gandhi’s work, which continues to inspire critical reflection on the nature of freedom and the possibilities of a just and humane society.

Conclusion

Hind Swaraj remains one of the most profound and challenging texts in the history of political and moral philosophy, offering a vision of freedom that transcends the narrow confines of political independence. Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization, his rejection of materialism and industrial excess, and his insistence on the primacy of ethical self-discipline together constitute a radical rethinking of what it means to be free. Swaraj, as he conceives it, is not a mere transfer of power but an inward transformation, a condition in which individuals achieve mastery over their desires and align their lives with truth and non-violence. This ethical reorientation gives Gandhi’s thought a timeless quality, enabling it to speak not only to the conditions of colonial India but also to the moral crises of the modern world.

Scholars have rightly emphasized the enduring relevance of *Hind Swaraj* as a critique of unrestrained modernity. Bhikhu Parekh observes in *Gandhi* that Gandhi’s thought “forces us to reconsider the very idea of progress and to ask whether material advancement without moral growth can truly be called civilization” (Parekh, p. 102). Similarly, Anthony J. Parel, in *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, argues that Gandhi’s work represents “an attempt to restore the ethical foundations of politics in an age dominated by power and expediency” (Parel, p. 168). These interpretations underscore the continuing importance of Gandhi’s insights in a world increasingly marked by ecological degradation, social inequality, and ethical uncertainty.

Ultimately, *Hind Swaraj* endures because it is not merely a historical document but a living philosophy, one that invites continual reflection and reinterpretation. Gandhi’s insistence on the unity of means and ends, his faith in the transformative power of non-violence, and his vision of a decentralized, ethically grounded society offer a compelling alternative to dominant paradigms of development and governance. As Judith Brown aptly remarks in *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, “Hind Swaraj remains less a blueprint than a challenge—a call to rethink the moral basis of our collective life” (Brown, p. 61). In this sense, Gandhi’s work continues to illuminate the path toward a more humane and sustainable future, reminding us that true freedom lies not in external power but in the disciplined and compassionate ordering of the self.

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