
UNIT 10 CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF INDIAN CIVILISATION

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide

- M. K. Gandhi, 28 June, 1925 (Collected Works, vol. 27, p.308)

Gandhi is a well-known critic of modern western civilisation. He saw modern colonialism as an outgrowth of this modern civilisation. Through his writings, he examines the 'civilisation' out of which modernity has emerged. The western modernity mostly identified with 'bodily welfare as the object of life and the resource of entire civilisation are put in the service of the good of 'bodily happiness'. Its pillars are insatiable possessiveness, machinery, mechanisation of every aspect of human life, rejection of virtue of religion, and coercive power. Gandhi's criticism of modern western civilisation is equally critical about the science and technology, colonialism, capitalism, consumerism and market. The propaganda of western mode of civilisation is carried with the power, dominance and colonialism and market. Gandhi stands against it from the moral worthiness of human beings.

At the same time, Gandhi is critical about Indian civilisation of contemporary times for adopting modern western civilisation and its deviation from the glorious ancient Indian civilisation. In this he is critical about Indian religious tradition on certain aspects. He considers that a once creative and vibrant civilisation had become degenerated, diseased and feeble, and fallen prey to foreign invasions of which British was the latest. Gandhi reflected deeply on the nature and causes of its degeneration and concluded that, unless radically revitalised and reconstituted on the foundation of a new *yugadharma*, it was

doomed. Gandhi's project of regeneration of Indian civilisation brought him into conflict with the Hindu tradition. Gandhi is critical of Hindu tradition on the issues pertaining to women, untouchability, peasants, and poverty. Gandhi has creatively used the resources of the Hindu tradition and also wielded a unique moral and political authority. Gandhi equates religion with spirituality, spirituality with morality and defined morality in terms of self-purification and social service.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The idea of civilisation
- The ideas of tradition and reform and the role of social reformers
- The critical understanding of Indian civilisation with reference to its practices

10.2 THE IDEA OF CIVILISATION

As Mathew Arnold (1879) said, Civilisation is the humanisation of man in society. The term denotes a 'developed or advanced state of human society'. Raymond Williams (1973) in his 'Key words' traces the association of civilisation with 'the general spirit of enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development', as well as its 'associated sense of modernity'. According to the liberal thinker J. S. Mill, civilisation stands for a 'whole modern social process', including an increase in knowledge and physical comfort, the decline of superstition, the rise of forward moving nations, the growth of freedom, and also 'loss of independence, the creation of artificial wants, monotony, narrow mechanical understanding, inequality and hopeless poverty.' In the discourse of anthropology, the concept is associated with evolutionary distinctions contrasting civilisation with savagery and barbarism. Civilisation has an explicit influence in world-making in the period when Europeans established world hegemony. European project justified as a project of civilisation. European powers claimed civilisation as the reason for their far-flung conquests. Non-European elite made civilisation their own, reshaping the concept to forge anti-colonial and nationalist struggles. As written in the earlier Unit, the defenders of modern civilisation include some brilliant and even some very good men, who are not likely to write against it but support it.

The modern conception of life is based on the principle of scientific rationality by keeping away from the religious world view. The 17th century conceptions of natural sciences and fundamental philosophy are, through practice, associated with Newtonian physics, Descartes philosophy and Hobbesian liberalism. By 18th century modern view of knowing and knowledge helped to define what came to be known as enlightenment. Scientific reasoning and scientific knowledge would increasingly displace religious thinking and spiritual knowledge. Modernity as defined by 17th and 18th century lineage is epitomised by the view that scientific thinking yields objective knowledge and universal truth. Gandhi is critical of the trajectory of modern western civilisation, which often cuts off from the religious tradition. Gandhi considers the western civilisation which is predominantly based on technology, as the disease of civilisation. According to him, it was the very speed and power of Western society that was at the root of its problem and these were all a sign of its moral decay. The supporters of the west believed in illusion built on confusing power with civilisation and biology with culture. For Gandhi, 'the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilisation is an indefinite multiplicity of wants'; where as ancient civilisations

were marked by an ‘imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of these wants’ (Young India, 2 June 1927). Gandhi solemnly states, “*If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined*”. Yet Gandhi does not damn England entirely for her faulty government; it is modern civilisation that is to blame. “*Civilisation is not the infinite multiplication of human wants but their deliberate limitation to essentials that can be equitably shared by*”. Gandhi critically evaluates the idea of civilisation and rejects this kind of western notion of civilisation. He argued that any civilisation has to be flourished on the cultural life of its people. Gandhi’s civilisation is based on its moral worthiness rather than material progress, and practical possibility of moral swaraj. Gandhi argues for the moral possibility of Swaraj while addressing the British colonialism, violence and modernisation. He projects the view point that “The tendency of the Indian civilisation is to elevate the moral being that of western civilisation is to propagate immorality” (Gandhi, 1908). Gandhi popularised the possibility of another civilisation—a non-Western, non-technological civilisation.

Gandhi’s ideas on civilisation have to be understood in the context of the struggle for ‘Swaraj’ of India against the colonial western empire. For him, swaraj means individual discipline, restraint from passion and indulgence and, acceptance of responsibility. He considers modern Western civilisation as corrupt and weak that lacks morality; bodily welfare is the object of British civilisation, where as Indian life is spiritual. England should not be a model or source of inspiration to follow by the rest but be replaced by the pride of tradition and spirit. At the same time, Gandhi is critical about the oppressive tradition, social practices and religious dogmas. He argued for the reformation of tradition and called for universal and humanistic religion.

10.3 THE RENAISSANCE AND INDIAN INTELLECTUALS

Modern way of life claims superiority over the ancient ways. It is believed that all the material progress is possible only through modernity. It considers that the ancient thought of India spiritually consisted in a destruction of desires, in the final realisation of a painless self, of a pure consciousness for which all worldly prosperity has to be sacrificed. The dominant thought of west discourages these as silly fancies and propagates the scientific progress for the material good of the humanity.

In the early decades, the British contended that India was a great civilisation that had fallen on bad times because of their despotic form of government, which denied its subjects basic liberties. Therefore, the British engaged in the mission of civilising the natives in the line of liberal rationalist views and justified their rule in terms of the increasingly fashionable concept of civilisation. They believed that India lacks scientific and rationalistic approach to life and needs civilising in the cultural and social practices. Colonialism spawned intense rationalism and undermined tradition both as a mode of discourse and as a form of knowledge. They engaged in the enterprise of initiating their subjects into new ways of life and thought. The British approached Indians in an aggressive and confrontational mood with a conviction of superiority of their civilisation. They were convinced that they have nothing to learn from the natives. Responding to this context, Indian intellectuals are constantly challenged to show what in their civilisation was worth preserving.

At this historical juncture, the age old Indian philosophical traditions and the values associated with civilisation are revisited in modern times by various scholars in the backdrop of Western colonialism. The response may be broadly classified into three

categories- Sanskrit Punditic circle, anglicised circle and western educated Indian liberal circle. The anglicised people are only nominally connected themselves with traditional faiths, but the problems of religion and philosophy, which are so much valued by their ancestors, have ceased to have any charm with them. The scholars in the punditic circle are carrying on their work in a stereotyped fashion not for the intrinsic interest of philosophy and religion but merely as a learned occupation or for living. The influence of western education on some Indian people instilled new ideals of nationalism, politics and patriotism; new goals and new interests of philosophy, life, social relations, social values and religious values are now appearing before us which are submerging as it were all the older, cultural and philosophical tendencies of the country.

The context explains that some of the Indian intellectuals are very strongly intoxicated with western view of life, whereas others are strongly loyal to traditional faiths. There emerged the new liberal intellectuals of western educated Indians, those who moved away from both the positions. They were convinced that we cannot bind our faith to our traditional past nor can we heartily welcome the western outlook of life. They had started introspection of their tradition in a changed atmosphere. So it is believed that the bed-rock of the old Indian culture and civilisation which formed the basis of our philosophy is past slipping off our feet. Our real chance of life, therefore, is neither to hold fast to the submerged rock, nor to allow ourselves to be washed away, but to build an edifice of our own, high and secure enough to withstand the ravages of all inundations. They proposed the greatness of their spiritual tradition against the modern western view. They had interpreted spirituality with new meanings rather than carrying with typical traditional view. For instance, they argue that it would be wrong to restrict the meaning of the word spiritual merely to a sense of God-intoxication or an ethical or religious inspiration. By spiritual therefore as determining the meaning of philosophy, it means the entire harmonious assemblage of the inner life of man, as all that he thinks, feels, values and wishes to create. They wish to keep away from the decayed and dead tradition and its values of civilisation. Indeed, these English educated liberal intellectuals played a major role in shaping the Indian culture, philosophy and history in modern times.

10.4 TRADITION AND REFORM: SOCIAL REFORMERS

Tradition and reform are the essential features of any human society. No society is immune to change. At the same time every society finds ways of preserving, transmitting and reforming its own traditions, of retaining its links with the past and getting ready to respond to the future. Many of the 19th century Hindu leaders are able to successfully challenge unacceptable social practices. Social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy argued against sati and polytheism, K. C. Sen and Lala Lajpat Rai against child marriage, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar against kulinism and the ban on widow remarriages and Dayanand Saraswati against image worship. Most of these are appealed to the scriptures, hospitable to their cause, invoked universal principles of morality, the need to change in the changed socio-cultural context, and warning the consequences of social practices that followed. They invoked glorious past of the nation for a solution of the contemporary problems. However, traditionalists and reformers have different view point on the Hindu tradition.

The Hindu leaders discussed colonial rule in the wider context of the betterment of their society and civilisation. The response has been varied. As Bhikhu Parekh suggested, the response may be broadly classified under the categories of traditionalists, modernists, critical modernists and critical traditionalists. While the traditionalists viewed nothing wrong with their cultural past and argued for upholding the tradition, others are disturbed by the

state of their society and keen to find alternatives. Among them the modernists argued that their salvation lay in radically restructuring it along modern or European lines. The critical modernists pleaded for a creative synthesis of the two civilisations. And the critical traditionalists preferred to mobilise their own indigenous resources, borrowing from Europe whatever was likely to supplement and enrich them. Both traditionalists and modernists are targeted for constant criticism. The critical modernists like Rammohan Roy, K.C.Sen and Gokhale are popular among this section. They agreed with modernists that India needed to modernise itself, but insisted that despite all its limitations, the central principles of Indian civilisation were sound and worth preserving. Though they never specified these principles, they had in mind such things as the spiritual view of the universe and the doctrine of the unity of man and of life, the emphasis on duties rather than rights, on altruism rather than self-interest, on society rather than the state, on the *atmic* rather than atomic view of man and on self-sacrifice rather than self-indulgence; the centrality of the family, the regulation of *artha* and *kama* by dharma. They pointed out that the Europeans had made a mistake of indiscriminately modernising themselves and rejecting their Greco-Roman and especially Christian heritage. As a result their civilisation lacked moral and religious depth and a sense of meaning and purpose. For India, it had an opportunity to combine the old with the new, to integrate spirituality with modernity, and to undertake a unique civilisational experiment capable of becoming a source of universal inspiration. Unlike the traditionalists who were content to live by the values of their allegedly superior civilisation and had no interest in turning India into a spiritual laboratory of the world, and unlike the modernists who were content to adopt the superior European civilisation, the critical modernists aspired to synthesise the two and become world teachers. Rajaram Mohan Roy's *Brahmsamaj* was intended to be a synthesis of the doctrines of the European enlightenment with the philosophic views of Upanishads, for K.C. Sen for reconciliation of ancient faith and modern science and asceticism and civilisation. Gokhale pleaded for a harmonious blend of the European spirit of science and the Hindu science of the spirit. These Hindu leaders had an imagination of the Indian civilisation, that was to provide the foundation upon which was to be constructed the structure of eastern ideas and institutions. Western natural sciences were to be combined or integrated with the Hindu metaphysics, the western state with Hindu society, liberal-democratic ideas with Hindu political philosophy, large-scale industrialisation with Hindu cultural values and western moral values with the Hindu theory of *purusharthas*.

The traditionalists, the modernists and the critical modernists were convinced that civilisations could be compared and assessed on the basis of some universal criteria. The critical traditionalists including Bankimchandra, Vivekananda, B.C. Pal and Aurobindo rejected this assumption. For them, civilisation was an organic whole and could not be judged in terms of criteria derived from outside it. All such criteria were themselves ultimately derived from another civilisation and thus lacked universality. Further, values and institutions were an integral part of the way of life of a specific community. The critical modernist aimed at preserving what was valuable in Indian civilisation; the critical traditionalists were content to eliminate the evil.

10.5 GANDHI'S REFORMIST PROGRAMME

Gandhi's reformist programme is more comprehensive and radical than that of his predecessors. He argued for the moral regeneration of Hindu society based on new system of ethics, and *yugadharma*. He defined Hindu tradition in his own way, by borrowing moral insights from other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism,

Judaism, Islam and Christianity. He was also influenced by the writers such as Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau. Gandhi's philosophy both continued and broke with the tradition of discourse developed by his predecessors. Unlike them, Gandhi's explanation and critique of colonial rule was essentially cultural. Gandhi insisted that the colonial encounter was not between Indian and European but ancient and modern civilisations. Like his predecessors, Gandhi considered Indian civilisation as spiritual and the European as materialist, but defined the terms differently. Though Gandhi's critique of modern materialist civilisation was similar to that of his predecessors, it did contain novel elements. It had a strong moralistic content. For Gandhi, Indian civilisation was essentially plural and non-dogmatic. From the very beginning it had realised that the ultimate reality was infinite and inexhaustible and that different individuals grasped different aspects of it. None was wholly wrong and none wholly right. Indian civilisation was not only plural but pluralist, that is, committed to plurality as a desirable value, not just a collection of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups but a unity-in-diversity. In this sense, his conception of Hinduism is more inclusive than sectarian.

In Gandhi's view, every civilisation had its own distinctive natural and social basis. Modern civilisation was born and could only survive in the cities, and carried all over the world by the commercial class. Indian civilisation had, by contrast, been cradled and nurtured in the villages, and only the rural masses were its natural custodians. So long as their way of life was intact, its integrity and survival was guaranteed. Since the civilisations that had so far come to India were all rural and thus posed no threat to it, it was easily able to accommodate and enter a dialogue with them. For Gandhi, every tradition is a resource, a source of valuable insights into human condition, and part of a common human heritage. Gandhi considers that tradition has a source of values and provides moral insights for humanity, rather than blindly negating the tradition. In that sense tradition is the valid source of knowledge since it survives the test of collective social experience. He argues that every tradition contained an internal principle of self-criticism in the form of its constitutive values. He believes that India had a tradition of negotiating through dialogue. Further he believed that dialogue between different traditions is both possible and necessary. This may facilitate for the progress of mankind and it should be open minded rather than imposing one over other. In this sense he opposed the values of the western imposition on non-European traditions. As an Indian, he was proud of being an inheritor of rich diverse religious and cultural traditions.

Gandhi made an attempt to reform Hindu tradition based on his conception of *yugadharma*. He has concern for reinterpretation of central principles of Hinduism in the light of the needs of the modern age. He challenges the orthodox Hindu conception of tradition and sought to replace it with an alternative view of his own. As Bhikhu Parekh explains, though Gandhi valued tradition, he was not a traditionalist. He reduced tradition to a resource, located its essence in its general moral values which commanded respect but left room for critical evaluation, and gave every individual the freedom to draw upon the insights of other traditions. Similarly, though he stressed the role of reason, he was not a rationalist. He respected 'cultivated reason', one 'ripened' by a deep acquaintance with wisdom embodied in tradition, especially, but not exclusively, one's own. And though an individual remained free to revise traditional values, he was to do so only after making a 'respectful' study of them and giving them the benefit of doubt (p.23). Gandhi saw no hostility or contrast between reason and tradition. Reason was not a transcendental or natural faculty, but a socially acquired capacity presupposing and constantly shaped and nurtured by tradition. Tradition was not a mechanical accumulation of precedents but a

product of countless conscious and semi-conscious experiments by rational men over several generations. The reformer's task was to elucidate the historical rationale of unacceptable practices and to expose their irrationality. He required both sympathetic understanding and critical spirit, both patience and indignation. This was how Gandhi went about reforming the Hindu ways of thought and life.

Gandhi engages in a creative dialogue with tradition. He tries to find out truth in tradition and emphasises it. He attached new meanings to traditional symbols. He believes that religion and scriptures need to be understood in the light of conscience and morality. Wherever scriptures contradict conscience, religion demands that conscience should be followed. Gandhi's critical dialogue with Hindu tradition and his struggle to reform Hindu tradition occurred within the colonial context. Gandhi tries to uphold the authority of Hindu tradition and protect it from the distortions of colonial rule. At the same time, he was much aware of the uncritical and mindless traditionalism of the orthodox, both unwise and impractical. Gandhi reconstructed the tradition in a creative mode to suit his context.

10.6 CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF INDIAN CIVILISATION

Gandhi was proud of the great Indian civilisation but was also critical of some of its dogmatic and inhuman practices in modern times. He questioned the immoral practices tagged with the name of religion and tradition and relentlessly fought against such practices. He points out the moral decay of Indian civilisation in contemporary times. He argues that the British have conquered India not because of their strength, or superiority but due to the moral failure of Indians. The modern civilisation of the British is responsible for the sustenance of the British rule. The Indians simply carried with this without any introspection. Gandhi argues that modern civilisation made man a prisoner of his craving for luxury and self-indulgence, release the forces of unbridled competition, and thereby bringing upon society the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering. The modern civilisation looks at human-being as mere consumers and opens up to the industrial production and it becomes a source of inequality, oppression and violence. The idea of civilisation is central to his philosophy and political struggles. On one hand, Gandhi finds the problems with the very ideal of modern western civilisation and the Indian engagements with it, and on the other he is critical of the Indians for deviating from the very moral foundations of their age old civilisation. As a result one may find novel and pragmatic interpretation of the Indian civilisation as propounded by Gandhi.

10.6.1 Religion

Gandhi's idea of civilisation is spiritual and religious. He comments the modern western civilisation as irreligion. In materialistic society, regardless of its religious or humanistic professions, the entire system becomes corrupt. He aimed at spiritualising the political life and political institutions. He insisted that politics cannot be isolated from the deepest things of life. Gandhi was concerned more about religious values than religious beliefs. He believes that religious dogmas are hurdles for religious experience. For him, religion does not mean sectarianism. Sectarian religion is purely personal matter and has no place in politics. Gandhi argues against the compartmentalisation of human life that had been brought about in the name of segregation of politics from religion. Religion means a belief in the ordered moral government of the universe.

Religion is central to Gandhi's thought. He regarded politics as applied religion. His ideas

on religion are complex and varied from time to time. He derives all his moral resource from Hinduism. His idea of Hinduism is different from the traditionalist view and is tolerant of other faiths and assimilates the differences into its fold.

'It (Hinduism) was the most tolerant of all religions. Its freedom from dogma gave the votary the largest scope for self-expression. Not being an exclusive religion it enabled the followers not merely to respect all the other religions, but admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths. Non-violence (ahimsa) is common to all religions, but it has found highest expression and application in Hinduism. Hinduism believes in the oneness not only of merely all human life but in the oneness of all other lives' (Young India, October 21, 1927).

He was proud of Hinduism but it did not prevent him from rejecting and criticising several institutions, ideas and beliefs which Hindus ordinarily regard as part of their religion. His Hinduism is not the one conventionally practiced. He attacks what he considers to be defective like the practice of untouchability. He views contemporary Hinduism as departing from its core principles. 'Gandhi's attitude was liberal and radical rather than conservative towards religious as well as political social and political institutions. He therefore invoked religion against all authority and not in support of church or state. He combined an absolutist sense of sanctity toward religious values with flexible and critical attitude toward religious institutions, and he was wholly critical toward existing social ideals, though less toward traditional social institutions' (Iyer, p.44).

He condemns some of the texts of scriptures because they are contrary to universal truths and morals or are in conflict with reason, such as child marriages sanctioned in the smritis. He insists that the defective additions must be rejected as interpolations. On his account, 'the texts of a tradition must be elastic and open to new readings today, just as they have in the past.' The interpretation of accepted texts has undergone evaluation and is capable of indefinite evolution.

Gandhi condemns the discords that take place in the name of religion, for instance, Hindus against Muslims. This kind of cruelty, he considers as irreligious. They are not part of religion, although they have been practised in its name. However, Gandhi argues that these hardships are far more bearable than those of civilisation. Gandhi writes, *'when its full effect is realized, we will see that religious superstition is harmless compared to that of modern civilisation. I am not pleading for a continuance of religious superstition. We will certainly fight them tooth and nail, but we can never do so by disregarding religion. We can only do by appreciating and conserving later'* (Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, p.43).

The higher religion was universal, and transcended particular religions. 'Religion does not mean sectarianism. It means belief in ordered moral government of the universe'. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. Such universal religion was in harmony with his ideas of truth and non-violence. Gandhi's religion was simply an ethical framework for the conduct of daily life. As a religious man, he aimed at perfection or self-realisation.

10.6.2 Untouchability

"Untouchability is not only not a part and parcel of Hinduism, but a plague, which is the burden of every Hindu to combat." (Gandhi, From Yervada Mandir, 1935, p.47). The issue of the caste system is central to Indian society and even a threat to the very idea of civilisation. The practice of untouchability is very much embedded in the Hindu social

structure and, has existed for several centuries. There are many interpretations of the caste system, both from its supporters and its opponents. Since the caste system connected to the Hinduism, there are various attempts to reform Hinduism. The practice of untouchability is an important issue for both social reform and nationalist movements. Gandhi not only brought this issue to the larger public but also fought against this inhuman practice in his own style. He dared to fight against the orthodox Hindus and tried to convince them as an internal critic. The sanataniists argued that untouchability was enjoined by the scriptures. In response to this, Gandhi demanded for evidence. He insisted that a religious text was not a theoretical treatise composed by a philosopher or a pundit given to weighing every word, but the work of a spiritual explorer containing insights too deep and complex to be adequately expressed in a discursive language. Gandhi believes that religious texts propounded eternally valid and, values and principles and were intended to guide all men everywhere. Religious text is both transcended and were conditioned by time. 'Untouchability as it is practiced today in Hinduism in my opinion, is a sin against God and man and is, therefore like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. There are innumerable castes in India. They are social institutions and at one time they served a very useful purpose, as perhaps, they are even doing now to a certain extent...there is nothing sinful about them. They retard the material progress of those who are labouring under them. They are no bar to the spiritual progress. The difference, therefore, between caste system and untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind' (Gandhi, Harijan, vol.1, 1933, p.2)

Gandhi argued that caste has nothing to do with Hindu religion. He focused on the practice of untouchability rather than caste system. He reduced the problem of untouchability to a matter of self-purification. He even supported *varnashramadharma* by providing new interpretation. For him, it is the *guna* that matters than one's caste/varna. Sudra becomes a Brahmin based on *guna* or his/her worthiness. In varna system, people are unequal only on functional terms. Gandhi thought that in principle, Sudras and Brahmins are of equal status. The critics argue that caste practices are sanctioned by the shastras. In response to this, he said, 'nothing in the shastras which is manifestly contrary to universal truths and morals can stand.' For him, *True principles of religion or morality are universal and unchanging*. 'Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth.' Further he argues that, 'The true dharma is unchanging, while tradition may change with time. If we were to follow some of the tenets of manusmriti, there would be moral anarchy. We have quietly discarded them altogether.' For Gandhi the problem of untouchability was the problem of the self, the collective Hindu self. He saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification. 'The movement for the removal of untouchability is one of self-purification' (Harijan, 15 April, 1933).

For Gandhi, Swaraj is unattainable without the removal of the sins of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity. Gandhi claimed that the heart of the caste Hindu could be changed by applying moral pressures within the framework of the Hindu tradition. As Bhikhu Parekh rightly pointed out, 'Untouchability was both moral and political problem. Gandhi's campaign was conducted only at the moral and religious level. He concentrated on caste Hindus rather than on untouchables, appealed to their feelings of shame and guilt, and succeeded in achieving his initial objections of discrediting untouchability and raising the level of Hindu and, to a limited extent, Harijan conscience. Since he did not organise and politicise the untouchables, stress their rights and fight for a radical reconstruction of

the established social and economic order, Gandhi's campaign was unable to go further. It gave untouchables dignity but not power; moral and to some extent, social but not political and economic equality; self respect but not self-confidence to organize and fight their own battles. It integrated them into the Hindu social order but did little to release them from the cumulative cycle of deprivation'.

10.6.3 Women's Oppression

Women are often victims of religious tradition. It is argued that the practices of patriarchy are internalised in the tradition. No civilised society sanctifies the oppression of women. The issue of women's oppression is central to the agenda of social reformers and the leaders of later struggles. Against the age old tradition, Gandhi brought a large number of women into the forefront of nationalistic struggle and provided courage and source of inspiration for struggles of women emancipation. Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, writes Gandhi, 'none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of women'. Gandhi's views on women are different from the earlier reformers. By commenting on child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry, sati, he exposes and challenges the Hindu orthodoxy while simultaneously reformulating and, thus, emphasising marriage as the only regulator of man-woman relationship in the society. He considers these acts as against swaraj. Gandhi links up the question of oppression to social and national health. In Gandhi's view the glaring abuse of Indian womanhood was the custom of childhood marriages. He saw evil as intimately related to that of child widowhood. It is irreligion, not religion. Gandhi saw education as an essential means for enabling women to uphold their natural rights. Gandhi realised that the identification of manliness with violence was likely to lead humanity to destruction. Men needed to emulate women's quiet strength and their resistance of injustice without resorting to violence. For Gandhi, the women who have the strength, courage, patience and a capacity for suffering can become a symbol of non-violence and peace. Women should be self-reliant. Gandhi often invoked the traditional symbols to mark the strength of women. If women were to get justice, scriptures needed to be revised and all religious texts biased against the rights and dignity of women should be expurgated. For this Indian women had to produce from amongst themselves new Sitas, Draupadis and Damyantis 'pure, firm and self-controlled'. Their words will have the same authority as the shastras, and command the same respect as those of their prototype yore. Gandhi argues for the personal dignity and autonomy for women in family and society. Rules of social conduct had to be framed by mutual cooperation and consultation, and not forcibly imposed on women from outside.

10.6.4 Modern Institutions

Gandhi was not only critical towards traditional institutions and social practices, but also critical of the modern institutions and its professional practices. For instance, railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country. Gandhi could foresee the effects of these modern institutions and explained it in his *Hind Swaraj*. He finds the grip of modern western civilisation through the institutions of railways, legal system and hospitals. Gandhi explains that railways are a distributing agency for the evil one. It may be a matter of debate whether railways spread famines, but it is beyond dispute that they propagate evil. Railways increased the frequency of famines, because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grains, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. They accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity. The holy places of India have become unholy.

Gandhi was critical of the legal system which had become the handmaid of colonial rule. The lawyers tightened the English grip. Gandhi argues thus, 'do you think that it would be possible for English to carry on their government without law courts? It is wrong to consider that courts are established for the benefits of the people. Those who want to perpetuate their power, do so through the courts. If people were to settle their own quarrels, a third party would not be able to exercise any authority over them. Without lawyers, courts could not have been established or conducted, and without the latter the English could not rule.'

Gandhi considers hospitals as institutions for propagating sin. Men take less care of their bodies, immorality increases. The moral basis of modern medicine is that it is taking a purely bodily view of health, ignores need for the health of the soul, which is necessary for the maintenance of even physical health. Men pretend to be civilised, call religious prohibitions a superstition and wantonly indulge in what they like. The fact remains that the doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we become deprived of self-control. In these circumstances, we are unfit to serve the country. To study European medicine is to deepen our slavery. Gandhi was critical of modern knowledge systems of the west and its practices and argues for the indigenous knowledge systems and its practices.

10.7 SUMMARY

Gandhi considers modern civilisation as a greater threat to Indians than colonialism. Colonialism itself is a product of modern civilisation. Gandhi was critical of modern civilisation from the religious and ethical point of view as it neither takes note of morality nor religion. Through his writings, he made an attempt to redefine Hinduism and the concept of dharma. In the past dharma was tied to a hierarchical system of duties and obligations and to preservation of status. Gandhi was critical of Indian civilisation for its deviance from the spirit of age old tradition. His criticism of Indian civilisation on the issues of women, untouchability, and religious orthodoxy are in tune with the *yugadhama*. In *Hind Swaraj*, he made a conscious attempt to actualise the real potential of Indian civilisation. He believed that Indian society has not fully actualised its age old civilisation in practice. Only an innovated Indian civilisation can help India to attain swaraj.

10.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Critically analyse the Indian intellectuals' response to western colonialism.
2. Discuss Gandhi's critique of Indian civilisation in the back drop of British Colonialism.
3. How did Gandhi redefine Hindu tradition and its dharma?
4. How is the caste system a hindrance to the progress of civilisation?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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