

# Self- Realization and Society in Gandhi's Hind Swaraj (1909)

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## Abstract

*This paper tries to explore the role of self-realization as one of the primal solutions to psycho- socio-economic and political problems facing the individual, community, nation, and the world with reference to Mahatma Gandhi's "Hind Swaraj". Gandhi's philosophy appears most clearly enunciated in Hind Swaraj (1909), a book written during his days in South Africa. The study investigates the issue of why the speaker gives more priority to self-realization while criticizing modern society as a major hindrance to free individuals, community, nation, and the world. The researcher argues that the speaker in this text wants to see his human world free from all kinds of socio-economic, political, and religious problems. The research approach adopted in this paper includes the opinions, and findings drawn from different research scholars and critiques. The conclusion drawn from this study is that self-realization should be seen as the main dimension of self-connectedness, authenticity, and the ability to realize and express ourselves through our work and thoughts.*

**Key words:** Self-realization, Gandhi, modern society, freedom, humanity

## Introduction

The human world has been experiencing turmoil for a long time concerning civilization, freedom, authenticity, duties and responsibilities, and the main gospel for humanity. In the meantime, various scholars, philosophers, political leaders, and activists have been advocating different doctrines on their own for the overall prosperity of the human world. Modernization, especially the western one has been much influential and at the same time controversial among the critiques who severely condemn western civilization. Mahatma Gandhi is one of them who is very critical of western philosophy and modern civilization. Gandhi particularly spoke against violence, human dependence on science and technology. He insisted on non-violence, human dependence on each other, freedom, and self-realization for the complete human world. Gandhi talked about the traditional human community which could save people from becoming dehumanized. Kiran Tajbakhsh argues, "Loss of traditional community isolates men and women who are then exposed to the crushing forces of impersonal bureaucracy and dehumanizing" (p. 5). In this context, Gandhi's idea of "self-realization" was discussed and interpreted with reference to the Indian context, when British colonialism had been dominating from social, political, and religious dimensions. I argue that Gandhi's "self-realization" in *Hind Swaraj* has been discussed by different scholars since this book was introduced to academia.

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But few studies have been carried out to look at why Gandhi gave due emphasis on self-realization while condemning modern civilization, capitalism, brute force, selfish interests, etc. which have been detaching human beings from their self-connectedness, humanity, cooperation, true freedom, and truth. The researcher argues that the speaker in this text wants to see his human world free from all kinds of socio-economic, political, and religious problems. The research approach adopted in this paper includes the opinions, and findings drawn from different research scholars and critiques. The main conclusion drawn from this study is that *self-realization* should be seen as the main dimension of self-connectedness, authenticity, and the ability to realize and express ourselves through our work and thoughts.

Hind Swaraj (1909) is a book written in a dialogical form- Reader, and Editor in which reader asks questions concerning civilization, brute force, and passive resistance to the editor. This small book of about 30,000 words was written in Gujarati, in November 1909, onboard the ship during Gandhi's return trip from England to South Africa after an abortive mission, within 10 days, 40 of the 275 pages being written with the left hand. According to Bidyut Charkabarty, "Hind Swaraj" is one of the most significant treaties that Gandhi wrote to clarify his views. Hind Swaraj is perhaps the most systematic exposition of Gandhi's ideas of state, society and nation" (p. 3). In the book, Gandhi expresses his views on Swaraj (self-rule), modern civilization, mechanization, etc. Self-realization and love being the main gospel, Gandhi severely condemns modern civilization. Gandhi insists on the achievement of self-rule so that everyone is their own ruler thereby becoming a not-a hindrance to their neighbors. Besides, the remarkable consistency of Hind Swaraj is to perform various functions: a whole theory of life; a higher weapon for self-protection for Indian civilization in particular, and the entire human civilization in general. It is assumed that Gandhi had interpreted the Vedic texts including The Bhagwat Geeta according to new contexts. The researcher argues that Gandhi's Hind Swaraj can prove to be one of the tools for enlightening entire humanity with respect to freedom, power, rule, civilization, modernization, ignorance, etc.

## Literature Review

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) has been interpreted from several perspectives by various critiques since this text was introduced into academia. Reviewing the book *Hind Swaraj* (1909, Mishra presented the crux of the book as "The essence of the book is that Gandhi crossed all boundaries of space, time, academic disciplines, religions and cultures to represent humanity in the truest sense" (681). It means that the universalism of Gandhi has been very intrusively explored both as relates to his person as well as his philosophy, in the entire discourse of the book. Prof. Mishra further says that Hind Swaraj amazingly proffers solutions to the socio-economic and political problems confronting India in particular. It also shows the direction to mankind, in general, to save itself from impending catastrophes like moral decay, social disintegration, etc. Gandhi condemns modern civilization that has been rooted in western philosophy. Gandhi is of the firm belief that man has become mechanical due to modern technologies resulting in dependence on machines rather than on humans. So, Hind Swaraj

can be taken as a revolt against these engulfing tendencies. Concerning, a civilization that has deviated man from spirituality to mechanization Mahesh Gavaskar in a journal writes:

*Spiritualism becomes a marginal concern of modern existence, the stranglehold of the external world increases manifold. Gandhi inveighs against the rampant hedonism ("bodily welfare", 32) that accompanies modernity. As a result, while the needs of the body are taken care of, the mind becomes indolent, lazy, and slothful, pampered and slave to "bodily comforts" (33). In such a state of "disease"(34) and "affliction" (34), the increased play of senses results in amnesia of one's true self. (15)*

Hence, for Gandhi, modern civilization is a false consciousness, which entraps man in the wrong priorities. Further, Gandhi in Hind Swaraj expresses his views on western civilization as being one of the main causes of establishing and promoting colonial imperialism, industrial capitalism, and rational materialism. He critiques these "isms" having had impediment on the true realization of the self. He goes on to elaborate; colonial imperialism is not a problem in itself. Gandhi categorically insisted that "the English have not taken India: we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength; but because we keep them" (H.S. Ch 7). Similarly, Gandhi sees capitalism as the dynamic behind colonial imperialism, Lenin too had said as much, and like Marx, Gandhi's rejection of capitalism is based on where machines are valued more than men. Gandhi is also against technology if it tries to replace man's inherent soul searching knowledge. He says that technology is but the expression of science, which in modern civilization becomes uncompromising rationalism. For him, this is but a dangerously truncated humanism. His incisive remark is much to the point: "Just as dirt is matter misplaced, reason misplaced is lunacy! I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason itself" (CW, 6; 106). Gandhi does not seem to be avoiding positive aspects of modern civilization, but rather he insists on using human reason as a guiding path in consonance with science and technology thereby balancing human life that finally optimizes humanism among people. He very clearly delineates that suffering is self-created and this self-created problem arises due to a lack of self-realization-full understanding of one's self that helps them to understand the entire universe. Therefore, the problem lies in us; not outside, so to overcome our problem; we should search for the solutions within us. Gandhi opines that truth and justice must be seen in terms of relativity but not in terms of absolutism. In order to justify his relative ideas, Gandhi takes references from the Bhagavad Gita. For Gandhi, truth has several meanings and forms. It can be situational as in the goal of a satyagraha, contextual and contingent as in the experimental truths found in his autobiography, and absolute as in his commitment to "Truth is God". In this sense, Gandhi is also interpreted as postmodernist by some scholars. Lloyd Rudolph in his essay entitled "Postmodern Gandhi" writes:

*Gandhi is postmodern in his hermeneutic. He sought meaning in context, a perspective he brought to the interpretation of practice and texts. He interpreted vegetarianism, a core practice for someone of his religion, caste, and family, and the way he interpreted*

*the Bhagavad Gita, a foundational text that Gandhi put at the center of his worldview. When I say that his hermeneutic was postmodernism I refer to the commitment to relative truth that we have just visited and to his avoidance of modernist hermeneutics such as the self-evidence of foundational truths or the transparency of universal metanarratives and of scientific and objective truths that claim to be independent of time, place, and circumstance. (7)*

Gandhi argues that truth and meaning are always dependent on a particular time, place, and context. That is, what is truth and justice in one context may be falsity and injustice in another circumstance. So the meaning is always relative. Gandhi's postmodern hermeneutics can be seen too in the way he read a foundational text, the Bhagavad Gita. He uses the genre to guide his readers' attitudes and expectations about how to read the Gita. "The Gita", he says, "is not an aphoristic work; it is a great religious poem...Nor is the Gita a collection of Dos and Don'ts. What is lawful for one may be unlawful for another. What may be permissible at one time, or in one place, may not be so at another time, and in another place...The deeper you dive into it, the richer the meanings you get. Further, Rudolph says "Gandhi's postmodernity is again evident in the way he discusses the idea of incarnation in Hinduism to show that the point of Gita is not to show Krishna as perfection incarnate but rather to show that self-realization is the subject of the Gita"( 12). Gandhi claims that in a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna at the time of Mahabharata, Krishna is trying to make Arjuna understand his 'self'. Krishna's teachings to Arjuna should be perceived not directly but as something as knowledge and devotion are essential for self-realization. From these interpretations, it can be argued that Gandhi is trying to interpret Vedic texts according to a new context. Gandhi states that problems and sufferings facing the individual, family, community, the nation, and the world at large are rooted primarily in humans themselves. Therefore solutions to such problems have to be the humans themselves. For this, humans need to understand their "self-power". Understanding the self is the best way of understanding the world. Gandhi further says that only political awakening is not sufficient for the real prosperity of the nation. What is more needed is real awakening and this is only possible through a process called self-realization. He says that his country India is politically free and independent, but spiritually largely dependent on the still-dominant western civilization. This is not going to benefit his country and people. Instead, India should come up with its own identity. We should come up with our own identity. Once again, for this, self-realization is necessary. Gandhi suggests that we have to find out the strengths and weaknesses of the past so that we can make our present better. To interpret Gandhi's Hind Swaraj from performance perspectives, Richard Schechner's two fundamentals of performance studies are worth supporting: "The primary fundamental of performance studies is that there is no fixed canon of works, ideas, practices, or anything else that defines or limits the field. The second fundamental is that performance studies enthusiastically borrow from other disciplines" (X). Hind Swaraj needs to be interpreted in the light of these principles and Gandhi himself has taken these fundamentals into account when reading the then civilization, western philosophy, and Vedic texts. Therefore Gandhi is right enough when he argues that self-realization is the main tool for anyone to understand

him, his surrounding, nation, and the entire world at large and accordingly execute their roles as per the need of the time and context. Performing based on the principle of self-realization requires an individual to sacrifice all the short-term bodily pleasures. Upanishad states that self is performed primarily by controlling our thoughts, feelings, desires, and emotions which are not good for the entire humanity in the long term. For Gandhi true civilization stems from our own glorious past rooted in our culture, tradition, religion, and practices. In the conversation when the reader asks editor [Gandhi] what true civilization is, Gandhi as editor replies:

*I believe that the civilization India evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors, Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has become Westernized; of China, nothing can be said; but India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation...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. (4)*

Gandhi's conviction about civilization, modernity, duty, and responsibility seems to be guided by self-realization. An Indian individual in particular and a human being, in general, should be the master of their thoughts, philosophies, actualization, authenticity, and performance of all kinds of duties leading to good virtues.

## **Conclusion**

Self-realization is the main solution to socio-economic and political disaster writhing with the individual, society, nation, and the whole world. Gandhi has rightly argued that for the true civilization, freedom, justice, identity, duty, rights, and prosperity of the society, everybody needs to understand the virtue of their "self". Through the process of self-realization, people are in a position to identify the right and wrong ideas and practices revolving around them and can perform their duties accordingly. Therefore, there is always an interwoven connectivity between self-realization and social change in the truest sense. Gandhi, through his magnum opus *Hind Swaraj* (1909) has been able to disseminate such ideas which are still quite relevant in today's time. Individuals, families, communities, society, nations, and the entire human world can become happier and more enlightened on the condition that the virtue of self-realization is implemented.

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