

## M.K. Gandhi Ideas of Peasant Society

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### Abstract:

*Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on peasant society are rooted in his broader vision of Swaraj (self-rule) and Sarvodaya (welfare of all). This research explores Gandhi's principles of non-violence, sustainable agriculture, and village self-sufficiency, emphasizing the empowerment of peasants. Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement, held peasants in high regard, seeing them as the backbone of India's rural economy and society. He believed in empowering peasants and advocating for their rights, including fair wages, access to land, and improved working conditions. Gandhi emphasized self-sufficiency and sustainable agriculture, promoting practices beneficial to peasants and rural communities. His advocacy for peasant rights was integral to his vision of a just and equitable society. Influenced by Gandhi's principles, the Bhoodan movement, initiated by Vinoba Bhave, aimed at persuading wealthy landowners to donate land to landless peasants. Gandhi's early movements, such as the Champaran Satyagraha and the 1942 Quit India movement, highlight his role in the peasant struggle. His concepts significantly influenced modern Indian peasant writings and contributed to the broader freedom struggle. Overall, Gandhi's vision of social and economic justice in rural India remains influential.*

**Keywords:** Peasant Society, Hind Swaraj, Civil Society, Sustainable Agriculture, Self-sufficiency, Social Justice, Champaran Satyagraha.

### Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's concept of struggle has played an important role in the peasant writings of modern India. This article specifically covers the peasant struggles of the 20th century and

contemporary Mahatma Gandhi's conceptions of peasant society and peasant struggles. Mahatma Gandhi and the national struggle have been critiqued by writers of recent Subaltern studies. This article also attempts to analyze

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Gandhi's concept of peasantry in the context of Subaltern.

Gandhi's first direct involvement with the Indian peasantry took place in Champaran, North Bihar, in 1917. However, his theoretical stand on the peasant question in general was, to a large extent, systematically elaborated before he began his active public life in India. Gandhi made a thorough critique of bourgeois civil society and wanted to replace it with peasant society. The ideal society based on a peasant economy, as outlined in Hind Swaraj, remained his goal throughout the rest of his life. However, his strategy for the mobilization of the Indian peasantry and his attitude towards agrarian relations of his time underwent a process of continuous evolution. In fact, as one scholar aptly remarked, "the essential characteristic of Gandhi's personality and of his life was its continuous growth and evolution." He always felt that he was experimenting with Truth. The title of his autobiography is significant. In 'experimenting with Truth,' Gandhi modified his views as and when circumstances demanded. Explaining why he had to change his views, Gandhi wrote, "My words and deeds are dictated by prevailing conditions. There has been a gradual evolution in my environment and I react to it as a satyagrahi." It is essential, therefore, to keep in mind the conditions which 'dictated' the 'words and deeds' of Gandhi. The historical context in which Gandhi's ideas developed was

colonialism, where the fundamental contradiction was between the colonial oppressors and the people of the colony. In such a context, Gandhi's historic task was to lead the Indian nation against political subjugation. Any movement in this direction is always guided by an ideology of nationalism, which is essentially multi-class in character. This multi-class composition of a national liberation movement notwithstanding, history teaches us that such movements gather momentum only with the overwhelming participation of the peasant masses. Hence, to give effective leadership to an anti-colonial nationalist movement, the historic task of the leader is to bring the peasantry into the vortex of national politics. It was precisely this task which Gandhi accomplished, and which made him the uncrowned king in Indian nationalist politics and enabled him to retain that position throughout his public life in this country. There were, indeed, a good number of peasant movements in India in the pre-Gandhian period. But it was Gandhi's intervention which gave peasant movements in India a nationalist direction and ideology, linking the peasant masses with the national mainstream.

Gandhi's moral and spiritual frame of mind was responsible for his refusal to accept modern civilization. One has only to repeat the words used by Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya in this context: "As one deeply influenced by the traditional values of Indian society, he could not withstand the crude, vulgar, materialistic, and

aggressive aspects of Western civilization. The mechanization and the consequent de-humanization of man - the chief symptoms of modern civilization were revolting to such a sensitive soul as Gandhi's. As a reaction against this horrifying aspect of Industrial civilization, he longed for the simple, pristine life. There he was in company with Rousseau and Tolstoy. He wanted to go back to agriculture and craft economy like Carlyle and Ruskin who wrote eloquent testimonies to human sufferings that came ravagingly as a sequel to the industrial revolution in England.

Now, we have already mentioned that the views Gandhi expressed on modern civilization in his letter to Polak had been systematically elaborated in Hind Swaraj. Gandhi made a severe condemnation of modern civilization which he saw with his own eyes in England, and which had been imported into India. In this critique of bourgeois civil society, Gandhi actually rejected the liberal bourgeois notions of modernization and development. The liberals of his time, both in England as well as in India, believed that social development comprised essentially the increase in material prosperity through the development of the productive forces in society and increase in the productivity of labour. To Gandhi, on the contrary, the sole index of modernization was the development of human personality through a process of humanization of man. Modern civilization, Gandhi felt, with its sole emphasis on material

comforts, had led to de-humanization of man. With increased productivity of labour and consequent increase in total social wealth, there began an unhealthy competition among individuals for acquiring more leisure and comfort. The richer section of society who won in this competition began living an idle and luxurious life with the help of modern science and technology. The less fortunate ones were doomed to live a life of burdensome toil and survived somehow in slums marked by poverty and squalor. The 'modern' system, therefore, Gandhi argued, was based on inequality, oppression, and violence. The remedy, Gandhi believed, lay not in any violent revolution of the oppressed against the oppressors. Here we find Gandhi very much in company with the pre-Marxian socialists of Europe who, as Engels pointed out, did not 'claim to emancipate a particular class but all humanity at once. For true social development, what was required, Gandhi argued, was a process of humanization of man. This humanization process, Gandhi felt, was possible only through the establishment of social harmony by the proper exercise of reason.

In Hind Swaraj, criticizing Western civilization, Gandhi wrote: "Let us first consider what state of things is described by the word 'civilization'. Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life... 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. 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. This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion.

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. They lack real physical strength or courage. They keep up their energy by intoxication. They can hardly be happy in solitude. Women, who should be the queens of households, wander in the streets or they slave away in factories. For the sake of a pittance, half a million women in England alone are labouring under trying circumstances in factories or similar institutions." To Gandhi, the

increase in the rate of productivity of labour is directly proportional to the rate of consumption in society. He criticizes both the application of machinery and the craving for excessive consumption. Machinery, Gandhi argued, instead of bringing peace and happiness to Europe, had brought exploitation and disease to industrial cities and unemployment and ruin to the countryside. Similar effects are produced in India with the introduction of machinery and an increase in the social urge for consumption. Gandhi wrote: "When I read Mr. Dutt's Economic History of India, I wept; and as I think of it again, my heart sickens. It is machinery that has impoverished India. It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared." The main reason behind this victory of Manchester in this uneven competition was, according to Gandhi, the Indians' urge for excessive consumption. "How can Manchester be blamed? We wore Manchester cloth and this is why Manchester wove it." And here is Gandhi's attack on machinery. "Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin."

The anti-machinist stand of his Hind Swaraj days was later modified by Gandhi. Nirmal Kumar Bose correctly pointed out that while writing Hind Swaraj, Gandhi took the term 'machinery' to mean something more than the

machinery itself, for he included in it the industrial system which went along with the use of power-driven mills in India at that time. The distinction between industrialism and machinery had not yet been drawn by him. As a matter of fact, his knowledge or experience of machines was very limited. However, after the First World War, the economic problems of pauperization and the resulting mass starvation and famines in India engaged his attention. It was then that he took a more realistic position regarding machinery. In November 1921 he wrote: "... I would favour the use of the most elaborate machinery if thereby India's pauperism and resulting idleness be avoided. I have suggested hand-spinning as the only ready means of driving away penury and making famine of work and wealth impossible. The spinning wheel itself is a piece of valuable machinery, and in my humble way, I have tried to secure improvements in it in keeping with the special conditions of India."

Gandhi's condemnation of 'modern civilization' in *Hind Swaraj* was, in fact, a moral critique of the fundamental constitutive features of bourgeois society. Criticizing the railways, Gandhi observed: "It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly, we had natural segregation. Railways have

also increased the frequency of famines because, owing to the facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. Railways accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity."

He also criticized the secularization of art and education in 'modern civilization.' According to Gandhi, as Partha Chatterjee rightly pointed out, the secularization of education has made a fetish of the knowledge of letters and has thereby both exaggerated and rationalized the inequalities in society. It completely ignores the ethical aspect of education and the need to integrate the individual within the collectively shared moral values of the community, and instead cultivates the pretension of learning many sciences. The result is a pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction, moral anarchy, and a license for individual self-seeking, leading to "hypocrisy, tyranny, etc." It also rationalizes, by ascribing an economic logic to it, one of the fundamental aspects of the social division of labor in modern industrial society, namely the distinction between mental and manual work. It denies that intellectual labor is an aspect not of the creation of wealth but of human self-fulfillment and must therefore be made available to every human being, and this can only be done if all share equally in providing for the needs of the body.

Gandhi also condemned two important professions of 'modern civilization,' namely, legal and medical professions. Since legal practice thrives on conflicts and disputes, lawyers are interested in perpetuating social divisions and creating new ones. The lawyer's duty "is to side with their clients and to find out ways and arguments in favor of the clients, to which they (the clients) are often strangers. If they do not do so, they will be considered to have degraded their profession. The lawyers, therefore, will, as a rule, advance quarrels instead of repressing them. Moreover, men take up that profession, not in order to help others out of their miseries, but to enrich themselves. It is one of the avenues of becoming wealthy, and their interest lies in multiplying disputes."

Gandhi criticized the constitutive elements of bourgeois civil society from a moral standpoint. 'Modern civilization' was rejected by him because he discovered it to be divorced from moral considerations. If bourgeois society is immoral, what type of society is moral? In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi gave the answer. The ideal society for him was a typical agrarian society as existed in ancient India. In trying to answer the question 'what is true civilization?' Gandhi glorified ancient Indian society. "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. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means 'good conduct.' If this definition be correct, then India, as so many writers have shown, has nothing to learn from anybody else, and this is as it should be. We notice that the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets, the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because he is poor. The rich are often seen to be unhappy, the poor to be happy. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have had no system of life-corroding competition. Each followed his own occupation or trade and charged a regulated wage. It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fiber. They, therefore, after due deliberation, decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. They further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them, and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They

were, therefore, satisfied with small villages. A nation with a constitution like this is fitter to teach others than to learn from others. This nation had courts, lawyers, and doctors, but they were all within bounds. These vakils and v aids did not rob people; they were considered people's dependents, not their masters. Justice was tolerably fair. The common people lived independently and followed their agricultural occupation. They enjoyed true Home Rule."

The political technique that Gandhi suggested in *Hind Swaraj* for the redressal of grievances and/or fighting against the existing social system was 'passive resistance.' "Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. Passive resistance, as Gandhi explained, is based on 'soul-force': 'When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force. For instance, the Government of the day has passed a law which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If, by using violence, I force the Government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be termed body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves the sacrifice of self.' This passive resistance, Gandhi asserted, was never a weapon of the weak. 'Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a passive resister. Do you believe that a coward can ever disobey a law that he dislikes? ... Wherein is courage required - in blowing others to

pieces from behind a cannon, or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces? ... Believe me that a man devoid of courage and manhood can never be a passive resister.' Gandhi pointed out the moral bases of passive resistance thus: 'After a great deal of experience, it seems to me that those who want to become passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth, and cultivate fearlessness.'"

Gandhi used the word 'trustee' for the first time in his letter to H.S.L. Polak, dated October 14, 1909. In this letter, explaining his attitude towards the British rulers, Gandhi expressed the hope that they "will be servants and not masters. They will be trustees and not tyrants, and they will live in perfect peace with the whole of the inhabitants of India." In one of his earliest public speeches in India, Gandhi appealed to the "richly bedecked noblemen of his country to act as trustees of their poor countrymen. There is no salvation for India unless you strip yourselves of this jewelry and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India." Later, in his post-Champaran days, Gandhi developed this idea of trusteeship into a full-fledged theory. He also developed two other techniques for effecting change through mass mobilization and mass action, namely, the constructive program and the Khadi program. We shall examine these in their proper historical context. Mahatma Gandhi's conceptions of peasants in the history of modern India

and the use of peasants by the Indian National Congress in the national struggle are seen differently in studies of these peasant struggles. It can be said that subaltern study in this regard is useful for the researcher under critical review.

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