
An Alternative Modernity

Gandhi is often seen as taking an extreme—even eccentric—stance in regard to what is defined as 'modernity'. His polemic of 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, is quoted as evidence that he rejected almost all aspects of Western civilisation, as imposed on India and other colonised regions of the world by the imperialist powers. There are however problems with this reading of Gandhi, as it assumes a questionable dichotomy between Western civilisational values and Gandhi's alternative morality. The difficulty flows from the term 'modernity' itself. In English, the word dates back to the eighteenth century, and it is frequently taken to denote the paradigmatic philosophical, scientific and governmental beliefs and practices that originated in Europe during that period and were subsequently spread throughout the globe.¹ Gandhi, however, endorsed many key aspects of this modernity, such as the doctrine of human rights, the fundamental equality of all humans, the right of all to democratic representation, the principle of governance through persuasion rather than coercion, and so on. In these respects, he can hardly be said to have been antagonistic to modernity. Rather, he took the position that in these respects Westerners frequently did

not practice what they preached. The liberal regimes of the West were, for example, far less democratic than they claimed, and extremely undemocratic in a colonial context. When we open up the issue more carefully, we can see that Gandhi was taking up a strategic position within the debates of his day. His relationship to modernity was a dialogic rather than antagonistic one.

What is taken as Gandhi's 'critique of modernity'² generally refers to his critique of the doctrines of materialism and instrumental rationality, the belief in scientific and technological progress, practices such as large-scale methods of production, rapid transportation, allopathic medicine, adversarial parliamentary systems of democracy and so on, and the accompanying conviction that it was the duty of those who subscribed to such values to impose them on the rest of the world. Against this, he counterpoised his own definition of what entailed a genuine 'civilisation' that had, he argued, to be rooted in an alternative morality. His position in this respect is set out most clearly in *Hind Swaraj*.

Hind Swaraj

Hind Swaraj was written by Gandhi in Gujarati in 1909, and translated by him into English in 1910. It took the form of a debate between an 'editor' (Gandhi) and a 'reader'. It is significant that this most seminal of Gandhian texts should have taken the form of a dialogue. Gandhi accepted that this was an unusual way of putting forward an intellectual argument in English (though there are of course highly respectable European precedents, notably Plato's *Republic*), but it came naturally to the Gujarati language. No doubt he had in mind here the interchange between Krishna and Arjun in the *Bhagavad Gita*.³ Gandhi stated in 1910 that he had engaged in a dialogue along similar lines with 'several friends', so that he was reporting a debate of the day.⁴ Although he does not state it as such, it almost certainly reflects discussions he had with the India House group in London in 1909, led by Shyamji Krishnavarma and including the militant Hindu nationalist V.D.

Savarkar. The group as a whole advocated the use of terrorism and violence against the British in India.⁵ Clearly, Gandhi saw it as his task to refute their belief in this strategy.

In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi attacked the common view that civilizational progress could be judged in terms of the sophistication of machines, technology and weapons, and standards of material comfort enjoyed by a society. Such yardsticks ignored issues of morality and religious ethics. In fact, technology had caused terrible harm to the world. In India, it had allowed the British to establish their rule and control the people with an iron hand. The railways, generally seen as one of the great benefits of British rule, had merely spread disease and caused famines, as foodgrains were moved in freight wagons from areas of dearth, and, worst of all, had made people aware of their religious differences, causing confusion and divisions.

Similarly, the printing press and newspapers served to titillate rather than inform. As Gandhi stated later, in 1929:

What would villagers gain by reading newspapers? They would come to know of the progress of motion pictures, of the progress made in aviation, stories of murders, facts describing the various revolutions that are going on in the world, dirty descriptions of dirty proceedings of law suits, news regarding horse races, the stock exchange and motorcar accidents. Mostly items of news mean only these things.⁶

Gandhi refused to accept modern systems of transport, printing presses and the like as defining features of 'civilization'. In *Hind Swaraj* he put forward a different understanding of the term: 'Civilisation 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 civilisation means "good conduct".'⁷ In the original Gujarati in which *Hind Swaraj* was written Gandhi used the word *sudharo*, stating that *su* meant 'good' and *dharo* meant 'way of life'. In doing

so, Gandhi appeared to have been providing an 'Indian' understanding of the concept. In fact, Gandhi's definition was as novel in Gujarati as in English. Belsare's Gujarati–English dictionary, which preceded *Hind Swaraj* by five years, defined *sudharo* as (1) reformation, (2) civilisation, (3) setting to rights, correcting; making accurate and exact, (4) improvement. *Sudharo dakal karvo* meant to introduce a reform, to introduce an innovation, or to introduce or adopt European manners.⁸ There was no tension here between Europeanisation and civilisation—*sudharo* was what the British did through their institutions, such as municipalities.⁹

Gandhi was thus putting forward a novel and radical new way of understanding the concept of 'civilisation'. His 'good way of life' meant placing a curb on our material desires and refusing to fetishise technology. Above all, we should not value competition as the supreme value that drives forward 'progress'. He claimed that in pre-colonial India people followed their occupations in uncompetitive ways, being satisfied to earn enough for an adequate subsistence. This allowed for an elevation of morality. He concluded: 'So understanding and so believing, it behoves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilisation even as a child clings to the mother's breast.'¹⁰

Whether or not this was true of the Indian past—and almost certainly it was not—Gandhi was mounting a radical challenge to values that had been propagated so powerfully under colonialism as to have come to be perceived by the Indian middle classes as virtual forces of nature.

The British authorities in India reacted to *Hind Swaraj* by banning it and seizing all copies. Gandhi initially responded by stating that: 'The British Government in India constitutes a struggle between the Modern Civilisation, which is the kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of God.' In this case, he argued, the former had the upper hand, but he hoped that older, more moral civilisational principles would prevail in the end. He advised his fellow Indians to assert the latter,

rather than worship at the shrine of Western civilisation. If they did so, the English would either have to change their whole way of being or quit India.¹¹ In 1914 he adopted a more conciliatory tone by insisting that the British were mistaken in their belief that *Hind Swaraj* was filled with hatred against them. He accepted that some Indians had read the tract in such a spirit. He regretted that a few had even felt that it showed that the British should be expelled as quickly as possible by armed force. This, for Gandhi, represented a grave misunderstanding of his intent. He had no hatred for the British, whom he loved as he would any fellow human. All he condemned was 'the present-day civilisation of Europe.'¹²

In later years, Gandhi accepted that in practical terms it was not possible to rid India of many of the attributes of modern civilisation, such as railways, hospitals, law courts, textile mills. He had to accept them as a 'necessary evil'.¹³ In 1926 he stated that in an ideal world these institutions and technologies would not be needed, but it would be wrong to get rid of them all at once, as it would cause too much unnecessary disruption. What was needed was a vision of a future in which we would not be ruled by such elements.¹⁴ Near the end of his life, in 1945, Gandhi said that there was no need to give up using facilities such as railway trains; all that was required was that they should be used in a non-attached way, as a utility, rather than consumed as an object of enjoyment.¹⁵

Some have read *Hind Swaraj* as an attack on the West, or Europe, from an Eastern perspective. However, although Gandhi often does talk in the tract in terms of an East/West dichotomy, this did not for him go to the heart of the matter. The fundamental problem for him was an uncritical assimilation of the civilisational values that were dominant in the West. This is clear from his preface to the English edition of 1910, in which he states that what he disliked about British rule and much Indian nationalism was that both endorsed 'the evils of modern civilisation' such as 'modern methods of violence'. If the British could reassert older values, they were welcome to

remain in India as equal partners.¹⁶ He never sought to deny that there was much to be learnt from the West. As he stated in 1926: 'there is much we can profitably assimilate from the West. Wisdom is no monopoly of one continent or one race. My resistance to Western civilisation is really a resistance to its indiscriminate and thoughtless imitation based on the assumption that Asiatics are fit only to copy everything that comes from the West.'¹⁷

Gandhi has been harshly criticised for his supposed attack on modernity, even by his strong admirers in other respects. Dalton regards the argument of *Hind Swaraj* as grossly overstated and sometimes absurd—Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau and other figures whom Gandhi admires in the work were, after all, products of modern civilisation. Dalton explains Gandhi's tone in terms of a certain immaturity of style, with an extreme position being advanced which he would later modify to accord with his more inclusive approach to problems.¹⁸ It is true that Gandhi toned down his statements in this respect in later years, although he never actually disavowed what he had said in *Hind Swaraj*. Otherwise, Dalton misses the point. It was in fact the very excess of *Hind Swaraj* that made it such an exceptional statement. Even if Gandhi later found it hard to defend all that he had said in it, he had succeeded in making many people think about the values that they considered civilised. If anything, the appeal of the tract increased over time, as the barbarities of world wars and fascism revealed a rottenness at the heart of Western civilisation.¹⁹ It was taken up as a manifesto by a wide range of groups and tendencies, ranging from critics of capitalism, to pacifists, ecologists and Christians. Its valorisation of the rural and small scale over and against the urban and large-scale also struck a chord with many members of the lower middle-class intelligentsia of India, who communicated the message to the subordinate classes of the rural areas. They in turn interpreted it in their own way, with at times some very radical consequences.

A Gandhian Civilisation

Gandhi's critique was selective. He focused on what he saw as the fetishising of technology and science, with its assumption that any technological improvement or scientific advance represented 'progress'. He condemned the consumerism that this promoted, with a constant valorisation of whatever innovation was seen to be the latest and most sophisticated. In this way, humans mortgaged their lives to the desire to experience and consume novelty, leading to a frenetic, ever-spiralling cycle of acquisitiveness. He also condemned the economic and political rivalry that lay at the heart of Western civilisation, with its emphasis on the value of competition over and above cooperation. These elements of modernity, in his view, compromised the great achievements of this civilization, such as the doctrine of human rights.²⁰

Gandhi wanted instead a civilisation rooted in an ethical science and technology, by which he meant investigation and invention that was applied to human need on a human scale. As he said in 1925: 'I think that we cannot live without science, if we keep it in its right place.'²¹ He himself was fascinated by science as a subject, and saw no harm in scientific research if it was undertaken for the sake of knowledge rather than for profit or material gain. It had, however, to conform to ethical principles. He considered, for example, vivisection by medical scientists to be a gross violation of animal life.²² Another problem with scientific research was that it was the preserve of élites, who were detached from manual labour. Without an understanding of practical needs, as experienced through such labour, the research was unlikely to be of great benefit to the mass of humans. It was thus far more important to devise a new, improved spinning wheel which could be used by village artisans, rather than invent some dazzling new labour-saving machine which could be afforded only by the rich.²³

Gandhi's critique of technologism and a materialistic and instrumentalist practice of science can be fitted into the post-Enlightenment thematic of the

divide between what Donald Worster has called an imperialistic science and an arcadian sensibility. Following Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, he has argued that, since the eighteenth century, Western thought has been confronted with a choice between two moral allegiances. On the one side there has been the drive to dominate nature in an aggressive way, involving the desacrification of the world and its reduction to a quantitative, mechanistic scientific understanding. In such a framework, certain humans have sought scientific knowledge with the prime aim of manipulating nature to enhance their power over others. On the other side there has been the demand for an ethical approach to human affairs, and a search for ultimate purpose, the ends of life, and a harmonious coexistence within nature. This is the critical side to the Enlightenment, in which human reason has been driven by the desire to advance towards greater human equality, liberty and fraternity.²⁴

The arcadian sensibility was seen in much eighteenth-century landscape painting, which depicted ordered, harmonious and gentle landscapes, with their quiet meadows, herds of cows and flocks of sheep and shepherds. They recalled a myth of the Golden Age that had haunted the European imagination since antiquity. They were given a new significance by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pastoral primitivism. Rousseau believed the pastoral and pre-agricultural stage of civilisation to have been the happiest for man.²⁵ There was a strong arcadian sensibility in India too, with, for example, the celebration in poetry and painting of Krishna the cowherd dallying with peasant maidens in an idyllic pastoral countryside.

Gandhi's position as an arcadian within this 'dialectic of Enlightenment'²⁶ was always, however, a dialogic one, involving a mediation of the concept of 'nature' through the idea of *prakruti*. The word 'nature', as Raymond Williams has pointed out, is a highly problematic one, with meanings that are not only variable, but at times also philosophically opposed. The English word derives from the Latin *natura*, meaning the essential character and quality of something. In time however it had also come to entail, among

other things, an idea of the physical power of the material world, as well as the inherent force that directs the world and humanity.²⁷ Whereas the emphasis on materiality allowed a separation to be made between nature and the divine, the emphasis on an undefined 'driving force' allowed for reconciliation between the two. Both the 'imperialist' scientist and the romantic could claim to be working 'in tune with nature', even though their understanding of what they were doing was greatly at variance. Gandhi invoked the concept in a way that might appear to have accorded more with the romantic sensibility, for he defined it as no more than a manifestation of God.²⁸ He did not however seek this pantheistic deity in the wild, as Thoreau and other Western romantics did—implicitly accepting a divide between 'nature' and 'culture'. Thoreau pursued his ecological vision by going to live in the woods near his home town as a hermit in a simple hut, eating berries and nuts, swimming in rivers and lakes, surrendering his being to the transcendental experience of immersion in a wildness free from human presence. In India, many sadhus and renouncers followed a similar path, seeking enlightenment through living in solitude in forests and mountains. Gandhi was rooted too firmly within human society to be attracted in any way by such a life. Gandhi's understanding of 'nature' was a far more inclusive one, rooted in the Gujarati word *prakruti*, which derived from the Sanskrit *prakriti*, meaning 'the original or natural form or condition of anything, original or primary substance', and 'the personified will of the Supreme in the creation ... also considered as identical with the Supreme being'.²⁹ In this, no separation could be seen to exist between material force and divine being, or nature and culture.

For Gandhi, the power of *prakruti* made a mockery of even the most advanced technology of the day. When a flood hit Paris in 1910, he observed that the great buildings that were washed away had not been built in anticipation of such an event. 'Only those who forget God will engage in such ostentation.'³⁰ Humans had however to do their best to bend the forces of nature to their ends. This was an onerous and never-ending task, to be

undertaken with a sense of humility. As he stated: 'The great Nature has intended us to earn our bread in the sweat of our brow.'³¹ In other words, what was required was an onerous interaction between human and non-human nature, exemplified by the diligent husbandry of the peasant cultivator. Such labour should be undertaken to earn a subsistence and no more. To try to take any more from nature was no more than thieving: 'If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thief it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world.'³² By equating nature with the divine, Gandhi placed himself within a pantheistic tradition that was central to much Hindu culture. From such a standpoint, nature/God can never be comprehended fully by humans, only experienced with a sense of awe, and treated with deference and humility. Such sensibilities have fed into some Western strands of pantheistic thought. For example, earlier forms of romantic nature-mysticism were reworked during Gandhi's lifetime by Henri Bergson, with his philosophy of vitalism, which asserted that plants and animals act according to an indwelling, mysterious power that cannot be measured by physics or chemistry. John Burroughs saw nature as a single huge organism, pulsing with life.³³ James Lovelock has restated this concept more recently with his notion of Gaia.³⁴

Like many arcadians, Gandhi hated the modern city, where modern technology was seen in all of its ugliness,³⁵ and where godlessness reigned. As he stated in 1916: 'It is not possible to conceive gods inhabiting a land which is made hideous by the smoke and din of mill chimneys and factories and whose roadways are traversed by rushing engines ...'³⁶ His ideal was that of the small-scale agricultural community, cultivating common land in a sustainable and largely self-sufficient way. Following Ruskin and Tolstoy, he emphasised the dignity of manual labour, either on the farm or in artisan

manufacture. He experimented with such a way of life in his ashrams, beginning in 1904 with the Phoenix Settlement near Durban. In such an environment, agriculture and craftwork were accorded a spiritual dimension. Once a week, the inmates gathered for a multi-faith service, with readings from the scriptures of a variety of religions. One observer has described Phoenix as 'an agriculture-based religious community'.³⁷

Gandhi was keen to apply the most appropriate techniques in his agricultural and artisanal activities. Ashramites were for example sent from Phoenix to learn from Trappist monks how to make sandals, the resulting products providing a valuable source of income for the institution. He advocated a careful study of horticulture and the establishment of model farms that would provide an example for surrounding farmers. He argued that refuges for cows maintained by many religious organisations in India should be turned into centres for cattle-research, so as to improve milk-yields.³⁸ He encouraged his followers to undertake socio-economic surveys of villages, so as to be able to obtain the facts on which appropriate campaigns for rural improvement could be based.³⁹ Gandhi did not therefore reject rational and scientific approaches to problems, so long as they accorded with his moral principles.

The Constructive Programme

All this fed into what is known as the Gandhian 'constructive programme'. Of all his work, this was closest to his heart, for as he stated in 1940: 'I was born for the constructive programme. It is part of my soul. Politics is a kind of botheration for me.'⁴⁰ The programme incorporated principles such as *swadeshi* (home-based production), in which a village, locality or nation would be as self-reliant as possible, *sarvodaya* (commitment to public welfare) and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness).⁴¹ Gandhi inaugurated it during the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920–1.⁴² Although such activity

is often subsumed within the rubric of 'development', this term had connotations of an evolution towards a Eurocentric model—an anathema to Gandhi. He therefore never used the word.

The Gandhian form of swadeshi sought to nurture forms of technology that were seen to be appropriate to the needs of the majority of the people. It aimed to provide dignity for manual occupations and allow for a more equitable division of labour, with all forms of work, whether public or domestic, being accorded an equal value. There was a place in this for labour-saving devices and technologies, so long as they reinforced this process rather than undermined it, as factory-based production was seen to do at a range of levels. By valorising labour-intensive work so publicly, Gandhi also emphasised that self-reliance through labour would be required for all citizens of a future India. For Gandhi, the winning and maintenance of freedom was impossible without such work-discipline.⁴³

The spinning wheel took pride of place in this campaign, as Gandhi believed that it provided the best means through which the poor could earn a supplementary income or save money by producing their own clothes. For him, it epitomised the spirit of self-reliance. He launched the spinning campaign in 1919, persuading one of his followers to offer a prize of Rs.5000 for the best design for a wheel.⁴⁴ A simple and portable wheel was produced in the following year. Gandhian activists raised funds to have these wheels manufactured and distributed to the poor. The thread was then supplied to handloom weavers to make into a cloth called khadi. Khadi *bhandars* (stores) were opened to market the results, along with other Indian-made products and nationalist literature. They provided an important focus in a town or village for this work as well as for wider Gandhian activities. Khadi was not however able to compete with mill-made cloth in terms of price, and hand-spinning did not turn out to be an economically viable occupation.⁴⁵ In the long run khadi production survived through subsidies from the rich obtained through the All India Spinners Association, founded by Gandhi in 1925. Khadi was kept alive because of its great symbolic

importance for the cause. In strictly economic terms, this work did not provide a good example of self-sufficiency.

This failure gave an edge to criticisms of Gandhian economic theory in general. He was accused of shunning labour-saving devices in favour of older-style labour-intensive methods of production that have historically condemned the poor to long hours of back-breaking labour. Although there was, arguably, some truth in this so far as khadi and other labour-intensive activities were concerned, there were many other areas in which appropriate technologies have proved to be of obvious value to the poor. For example, working conditions for women have been greatly improved through improvements in *chula* (stove) design, the development of *gobar* gas plants and solar cookers, and improvement of hand-pumps. Relatively small changes in the designs of bullock-carts, ploughs and agricultural implements have greatly enhanced the productivity of farmers at a minimum cost. Locally based seed experiments have determined the varieties that provided the highest yield for organic forms of agriculture in a particular microclimate. Cattle have been improved through breeding programmes in *goshalas*, leading to increases in milk yield. Particular strains of grass have been promoted to provide better fodder for livestock. Techniques such as the building of small check-dams on rivers and streams, the lining of tanks with an artificial membrane to prevent seepage, well-replenishment through channelling monsoon rain, water-pumping from rivers, and drip-irrigation have proved to have huge drought-proofing potential.⁴⁶

Even khadi might be made a success. Much of its problem has probably stemmed from the fact that khadi-spinning and weaving were fetishised, while other elements necessary for a sustainable and eco-friendly cotton-growing economy were neglected. Recent work by Uzamma Bilgrimi in Andhra Pradesh has indicated that what is required is an agricultural system which incorporates local indigenous forms of short-staple cotton which are relatively drought-resistant and which are ideal for hand ginning and

weaving. Such cotton can be interplanted with food crops in a way that minimizes attacks by pests. It is cheap to grow, harvests are more reliable, and the resulting cotton cloth is typically of very high quality—unlike a lot of the cloth sold today in khadi shops—and able, potentially, to earn the producers a good income.⁴⁷

What this brings out is that alternative economic systems cannot be dreamed up and applied in dogmatic ways. There has to be careful open-minded investigations of problems on the ground, followed by slow and cautious experiments with more people-oriented and eco-friendly forms of production. There will be many mistakes, and much fine-tuning will always be required.

Gandhi understood this very well, and was a firm advocate of the careful and scrupulous social survey that was informed by a scientific spirit and open frame of mind. Following the principles of the great Victorian social investigators of Britain, he sought to identify problems through detailed fieldwork, involving the collection of testimonies and statistics. He claimed to be doing this in a neutral way, with his future action being guided by his findings. It was however almost inevitable that such investigation would reveal abuses of power by local élites and officials. The nationalist agenda of Gandhi and his assistants was also well known, and the radicalising potential of such work was only too obvious. Because of this, the local authorities tended to view the whole process with suspicion, and they could be openly hostile.

Gandhi applied such an approach in Champaran District of Bihar, where he went in 1917 to investigate complaints by the peasants against white indigo planters. The local authorities were not impressed, and promptly arrested him. In a statement before the court he asserted:

I have entered the country with motives of rendering humanitarian and national service. I have done so in response to a pressing invitation to come and help the ryots, who urge they are not being fairly treated by the indigo

planters. I could not render any help without studying the problem. I have, therefore, come to study it with the assistance, if possible, of the administration and the planters. I have no other motive and I cannot believe that my coming here can in any way disturb the public peace or cause loss of life. I claim to have considerable experience in such matters. The administration, however, have thought differently.⁴⁸

The higher authorities in India did not however want to alienate Gandhi at that juncture—for he was supporting the war effort—and they ordered the local authorities to abandon the prosecution and allow the survey to continue. The same method was applied a year later in Kheda District to investigate the grievances of the peasants against the government. Similar surveys were carried out under the direction of his followers, such as Narhari Parikh in Bardoli Taluka of Surat District in 1927 and J.C. Kumarappain Matar Taluka of Kheda district in 1928–30. The results were published, with suggestions being put forward for appropriate remedies for the various problems that had been exposed.⁴⁹ In all of these cases the surveys preceded major nationalist-led protests, that of the Kheda Satyagraha of 1918, the Bardoli no-tax campaign of 1928 and the Kheda no-tax campaign during the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930–1. It was clear from this that such work tended to have very radical consequences.

Gandhi, Socialism, and the Doctrine of Trusteeship

Gandhi did not believe that socialism provided a path to the form of civilization that he advocated. He had a low opinion of the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia: 'Bolshevism is the necessary result of modern materialist civilisation. Its insensate worship of matter has given rise to a school which has been brought up to look upon material advancement as the goal and which has lost all touch with the finer things of life.'⁵⁰ He went on to argue

that through satyagraha the people of India could prevent Bolshevism from becoming rampant in the land.

At the time when Gandhi made this statement, few Indian nationalists—even those considered most radical at that time—were socialists. The large majority endorsed the capitalist path, albeit one in which Indians would be free from British imperial control. Gandhi, with his sharp critique of many elements of capitalist modernity, was the one out on a limb. This changed during the 1920s, as a younger generation began to look to the Soviet Union as a model to be emulated. The economic crash of 1929, followed by the slump of the 1930s, strengthened this tendency. We thus find leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar endorsing the capitalist path in his writings of the 1920s, but moving to the left during the 1930s and adopting a far more socialistic position.⁵¹

Gandhi was not insensitive to this development, and during the 1930s and 1940s he carried on a continuing dialogue with socialist nationalists. He accepted the worth of the socialist goals of eliminating poverty and gross inequalities and their struggle for the right of all to a livelihood. He considered that he was in fact more in tune with such sentiments than most socialists and communists, whose work was, he claimed, dictated more by politics than a sense of heartfelt compassion.⁵² He had a particularly close relationship with the Congress Socialist Party leader Jayprakash Narayan, and he debated these issues at length with him. He stated in 1940 that: 'I know many friends who delight in calling themselves communists. They are as harmless as doves. I call myself a communist in their company. The underlying belief of communism is good and as old as the hills.'⁵³ In 1946 he even came round to the socialist view that key industries should be nationalised. However, he refused to accept that this should be carried out in a coercive or violent manner, arguing that it should be done with the cooperation of the owners.⁵⁴ In this latter respect, he was in fundamental disagreement with most socialists.

Where Gandhi differed most radically from the socialists and communists was over their belief in the necessity for class struggle. He saw this as inculcating hatred and creating a distance between opponents that was counter-productive. In particular, it entailed violence. He contrasted class struggle with satyagraha:

By the non-violent method we seek not to destroy the capitalist, we seek to destroy capitalism. We invite the capitalist to regard himself as a trustee for those on who he depends for the making, the retention and the increase of his capital. Nor need the worker wait for his conversion. If capital is power, so is work. Either power can be used destructively or creatively. Either is dependent on the other. Immediately the worker realises his strength, he is in a position to become a co-sharer with the capitalist instead of remaining his slave. If he aims at becoming the sole owner, he will most likely be killing the hen that lays golden eggs. Inequalities in intelligence and even opportunity will last till the end of time.⁵⁵

Gandhi argued that it was possible to appeal to the good in every person, however grasping and oppressive they might appear to be.⁵⁶ He sought to inculcate a spirit of aparigraha, or non-possession. This would require that each would hold whatever assets they possessed in trust for the good of society. Thus, the rich were required to deploy their wealth for the benefit of those who worked for them, while labourers were required to provide their labour to those who needed it, e.g. their employers.⁵⁷ Owners of the means of production should not take more than was needed for a comfortable, but not extravagant, life. Workers were to be treated as if they were members of a family, with provision being made for healthy working and living conditions and general welfare.

Employers, landlords and capitalist entrepreneurs could very obviously deploy the concept of trusteeship in a self-serving way. It has been strongly condemned by Marxists, such as R. Palme Dutt, who saw this as 'the familiar bourgeois essence' showing through 'the idealistic cover'.⁵⁸

Herein lies the practical significance of this preaching from the standpoint of the big bourgeoisie, who tolerate and even encourage its Utopian yearnings and naïve fantasies with a smile, because they know its business values for protecting their class interests and assisting to hold in the masses and maintain class peace.⁵⁹

Marx and Engels themselves, however, had criticised what they defined as Utopian socialism—associated with Robert Owen and other early nineteenth-century radicals—not only because it downplayed class antagonisms, but because it also, and more importantly, rejected political struggle in favour of isolated social experiments.⁶⁰ Clearly, Gandhi could not be placed in the latter category—he was a political activist who fought tirelessly for the rights of the poor and oppressed on a wide stage.

There is no escaping the fact, however, that the faith that Gandhi placed in capitalist entrepreneurs as a class was largely misplaced. Only a few exceptional businessmen of the day, like Jamnalal Bajaj and J.R.D. Tata, may be said to have approached such an ideal. The large majority continued to do everything they could to drive down wages and keep the working classes in their place by denying them basic welfare provisions. This was the case even in Ahmedabad, where the few millowners who subscribed to Gandhian principles were in continuing conflict with the majority who did not. In 1920, the progressive entrepreneur Ambalal Sarabhai, with his visions of industrial harmony, was challenged by a coterie of mean-minded Baniyas led by Sheth Mangaldas whose main aim was to destroy the Gandhian union that had been established earlier in that year. When Gandhi called a strike and forced the latter to agree to a compromise, the unscrupulous millowner did his best to wreck the agreement. Even in his home city, Gandhi had failed to bring about any genuine or widespread change of heart amongst the majority of capitalists.⁶¹

Gandhi's position has, however, elements in common with an argument about class struggle put forward by Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur maintains that

many elements of life in a society cut across class boundaries—such as language, culture, sexuality, and nationality. He states that the aim in class conflict should not be the destruction of the enemy through class war, but the forging of a society in which both parties are integrated in an equitable way: 'Some of the European communist parties—particularly in Italy and now in France and Spain—have formulated the idea that the problem is to develop a society better integrated than in the class structure. The point, then, is really to integrate and not to suppress or destroy one's enemy.'⁶² This, in many respects, was what Gandhi sought when he became involved in struggles between capital and labour.

The Gandhian Critique Beyond India

In recent years, the Gandhian approach to social and economic problems has been taken up in vigorous new ways, not only in India but in the world as a whole.⁶³ The person who was probably most responsible for starting this trend was E.F. Schumacher (1911–77). He was a German economist who left Germany in the 1930s and became an economic adviser to the British government in the 1940s and 1950s. After a visit to Burma in 1955 he became convinced that there were serious problems with the economic strategies of the so-called 'developing countries'. The emphasis was on capital-intensive advanced technology that would, it was believed, raise productivity and make those countries competitive in the world economy. They lacked however the human and material infrastructure necessary for these small, highly developed sectors to develop in a dynamic and profitable way. What was needed, he argued, was a form of technology that was appropriate to each particular region. In most cases this would be labour-intensive, small in scale, and not needing huge amounts of investment. He called this 'intermediate technology'.

Schumacher developed the idea through interaction with other economists who had been thinking along similar lines, such as the

Gandhian economist J.C. Kumarappa, and the director of the Gokhale Institute in Pune, D.R. Gadgil, who in 1964 put forward a similar concept of 'appropriate technology', arguing that it was imperative that the Indian government give a far higher priority to such a sector.⁶⁴ Schumacher, who had been an adviser to the National Coal Board in Britain, also became convinced that the profligate use of energy in industrialised countries was unsustainable, and that the future lay with low-energy production. He was also president of the Soil Association, the foremost body in Britain propagating organic agriculture. His influential book of 1973, *Small is Beautiful*, combined with great power his critique of developmentalism with an ecological awareness.

In this work, Schumacher started with the Gandhian principle that ethics were foremost, contrasting this with the fetishising of economic growth by neo-classical and Keynesian economists, and the 'idolatry of giantism' of twentieth-century governments.⁶⁵ Economists, he argued, claimed to be putting forward value-free 'truths', while failing to understand their own metaphysics. What he proposed instead was a 'Buddhist economics', though he noted that the teachings of Christianity, Islam, Judaism or any other great religion would do as well.⁶⁶ An ethical economics put humans and their needs first, and evolved economic policies around them.

He put forward a strongly Gandhian justification for intermediate technology:

As Gandhi said, the poor of the world cannot be helped by mass production, only by production by the masses. The system of *mass production*, based on sophisticated, highly capital-intensive, high energy-input dependent, and human labour-saving technology, presupposes that you are already rich, for a great deal of capital investment is needed to establish one single workplace. The system of *production by the masses* mobilises the priceless resources which are possessed by all human beings, their clever brains and skilful hands, *and supports them with first-class tools*. The technology of *mass*

production is inherently violent, ecologically damaging, self-defeating in terms of non-renewable resources, and stultifying for the human person. The technology of *production by the masses*, making the use of the best of modern knowledge and experience, is conducive to decentralisation, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of scarce resources, and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines. I have named it *intermediate technology* to signify that it is vastly superior to the primitive technology of bygone ages but at the same time much simpler, cheaper, and freer than the super-technology of the rich.⁶⁷

The élites of the poor countries had reacted to such a suggestion with the retort that they did not want second best. Schumacher commented that this was a reaction of those who were not in desperate need of employment.⁶⁸ What he was proposing was not some outdated and anachronistic technology, but an innovative technology that was tailored to the needs of the mass of the people. The greatest ingenuity and skill would be needed to develop such an alternative.⁶⁹ In merely seeking to ape the forms of production found in the richer nations, those élites were showing themselves up as unimaginative parasites.⁷⁰

Another powerful plea for an alternative economic order was put forward around the same time by Ivan Illich (b.1926). Illich was an Austrian who served as a Catholic priest in a poor parish of New York City in the 1950s. In the 1960s he moved to Puerto Rico and then Mexico, where he wrote four influential books that were published between 1970 and 1975. The second of these books, *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), echoed many of Schumacher's concerns about large-scale industrial society and the marginalisation of the masses. Illich demanded that we develop 'convivial' tools and technologies—the equivalent of Schumacher's intermediate technology—and that we learn to set limits to growth.⁷¹

Some of Illich's other themes have parallels with the critique being developed at the same time by Michel Foucault of the disciplinary bases to

many core modern institutions. In his first book, *Deschooling Society* (1971), Illich focussed on modern education, which he saw as being devised primarily to allow for an authoritarian management of societies, and which inhibited rather than expanded learning opportunities for the mass of the people. He proposed instead decentralised, disestablished and multiple systems of learning, which would develop in pupils a critical and enquiring frame of mind.⁷²

In *Medical Nemesis* (1975), he expanded the analysis to the modern health system, which he argued created an unacceptable level of paternalistic control over the patient. In many cases, treatment made people more ill—something he defined as 'structural iatrogenesis'.⁷³ Although Gandhi is not mentioned at all in this book, his attack on modern medicine echoes that of *Hind Swaraj*. Gandhi had in this work stated that at one time it had been his ambition to serve India by becoming a doctor, but that his observation of the practice of Western medicine had made him change his mind. He had come to see that Western-style doctors used their knowledge to enhance their power over others and fill their pockets with money. They pandered to the rich, treating diseases that were caused by over-indulgence, and did not teach people to control their appetites and discipline their bodies. He had concluded: 'To study European medicine is to deepen our slavery.'⁷⁴ The best medicine was a healthy way of life, and this form of medication could only be self-prescribed. Illich came to the same conclusion: 'A world of optimal and widespread health is obviously a world of minimal and only occasional medical intervention. Healthy people are those who live in healthy homes on a healthy diet ...'⁷⁵

Illich's *Energy and Equity* (1974) was a short book that launched a fierce attack on the modern obsession with rapid transport. Huge amounts of energy were consumed, which led to overexploitation of the environment and severe pollution. The costs of building and maintaining these transport systems was also crippling for society. Individuals had to labour long hours

to earn sufficient to purchase, maintain and run their cars. It was claimed that rapid transport liberated humans; in fact, he argued, it enslaved them.⁷⁶

Fifty years earlier, Gandhi had also condemned the modern obsession with speed: 'Once we were satisfied with travelling a few miles an hour, today we want to negotiate hundreds of miles in an hour, one day we might desire to fly through space. What will be the result? Chaos—we would be tumbling upon one another, we would be simply smothered.'⁷⁷ When he was in London he had observed huge traffic-jams at every corner. This was, he asserted, the inevitable consequence of more and more people having the means to travel long distances *en masse*. When he was asked how he could justify his own use of railway trains, he replied that he wished that he could do his work without the need for such travel. He accepted that modern communication systems allowed certain well-meaning people to carry out valuable social work on a wider stage, but felt that the good they did was far outweighed by the damage caused by the extension of new forms of transport: 'Today two good people come from America with a kind and loving message. But along with the two come two hundred with all sorts of motives. For aught we know a large number may be coming just in search of further avenues of exploitation.'⁷⁸ He himself preferred to walk whenever it was practicable to do so. This had in fact been a rule in his South African settlements, and it had not limited his mobility all that much—on one particular day he had even managed to walk fifty-five miles.⁷⁹

Gandhi's critique of rapid transport lacked the ecological element of the later one put forward by Illich. Both shared, however, a belief that the underlying problem was moral—namely that rapid transport benefited the rich at the cost of the poor. Illich proposed an intermediate-level transport system, which was based on bicycles and slow moving and easily maintained motorised vehicles for the masses. 'To expand life beyond the radius of tradition without scattering it to the winds of acceleration is a goal that any poor country could achieve within a few years, but it is a goal that will be

reached only by those who reject the offer of unchecked industrial development made in the name of an ideology of indefinite energy consumption.⁸⁰ Twenty years on, these sort of arguments provided a basis for an attack on the modern obsession with road building. Highly effective and well-publicised anti-road protests in Britain and elsewhere forced governments to modify and even abandon some of their more grandiose road-building schemes.

Gandhian economics and constructive work also had a powerful impact on the thinking of workers in non-government organisations that were concerned with the social and economic development of poor countries. We can trace this trajectory in the history of one of the foremost of such agencies, Oxfam. In 1966–7, Oxfam's famine relief work in Bihar brought their representatives into close contact with Gandhian workers. This was the first time that Oxfam had worked in depth with what Maggie Black has classed as 'an agency authentically and inspirationally Indian'.⁸¹ At that time the Oxfam field directors were ideologically committed to the principles of the Green Revolution, with its emphasis on high-yielding plant-hybrids developed by multinational agencies and companies, which needed lavish inputs of irrigation water, fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, all of which increased the dependency of farmers on multinational corporations. From a Gandhian perspective, Green Revolution technology was highly divisive, as it increased the gap in wealth between the rich farmers who could afford such inputs and the poor who could not. They were hardly likely to be enthusiastic about such a programme for rural development.

To the credit of the Oxfam fieldworkers, they took the criticisms of the Gandhian workers seriously, and began to ask critical questions of their own. They saw that poor peasants who had obtained land through land reform could only retain control over their new plots if they were able to achieve enough self-sufficiency to break the hold of the rural élites. This was possible if they could gain access to credit that was not controlled by the élites, or given small grants to obtain their own inputs. The partnership with

the Gandhians proved to be a turning point for Oxfam in this respect, as it was the first time they had had to grapple with the problem of implementing programmes that would alleviate the problems of the poorest strata of rural society. In the process, they learnt that the 'development' strategies propounded with such bombastic faith by Western governments and transnational organisations were not only failing to help the poor, but were in fact making their situation worse. They began to see very clearly the neo-colonial agendas of such strategies.

During the 1970s Oxfam became known for its critical stance in these respects. It focused on working with local people (which included replacing expatriate field directors with local women and men), and tried to be sensitive to local practice and needs. The emphasis on Green Revolution technology was replaced with the encouragement of appropriate technology and maximum village self-sufficiency. Funds were for example provided for the building of small check dams, which helped raise the water table in a locality. In subsequent years, many other voluntary agencies based in the West were to follow this path also.⁸²

Gandhian social and economic theory has also fed into the modern ecology movement. Gandhi is routinely held up as an inspirational figure by ecological thinkers and activists in India and elsewhere. Many of them claim that he foresaw ecological disaster in *Hind Swaraj*. However, as Ramachandra Guha has observed, this work does not in fact have anything to say about ecology as such. For this, we need to look at other writings by Gandhi. In 1928 he stated that if Indians imitated the British in their exploitation of the globe, the world would soon be stripped bare.⁸³ Otherwise, Guha argues, his programme for an equitable, low technology and largely agrarian human society may be read ecologically, as providing a model for a more sustainable future. In another work, co-authored with Madhav Gadgil, he and Gadgil maintain that many ecologists in India echo Gandhi in seeing this as above all a moral and civilisational problem which is rooted in a materialism and consumerism that alienates people from

nature and encourages wasteful ways of life. In this, India is seen to be betraying its civilisational heritage, and such Gandhian ecologists call for a return to a more ecologically harmonious pre-colonial form of social organisation, as invoked by Gandhi in his notion of Ram Rajya. Following this, some Gandhians claim that a reverence for nature is rooted within the Hindu scriptures.⁸⁴

Ramachandra Guha is positive about many aspects of the Gandhian legacy as applied to the ecological movement, but is critical about what he sees as its excessive emphasis on rural life. He argues that Gandhi and his followers have neglected urban environmental problems, which are particularly urgent in India today.⁸⁵ This is not altogether fair— in Ahmedabad Gandhi fought for the right of textile millworkers for a dignified life, involving union representation, wages linked to profits, shorter working hours, better housing and education.⁸⁶ What is true, however, is that Gandhi above all valorised a particular type of rural society—that of the smallholding peasant farmer, husbanding fixed fields. He had little to say about forest-dwellers, shifting cultivators or nomadic pastoralists and their various problems.

These considerations have in no way prevented the routine invocation of Gandhi within the ecology movement. For example, when over 1,500 activist groups came together in early 1999 to begin a protest against genetically modified seeds and crops, they chose the sixth of March, the anniversary of the launch of Gandhi's salt march, to inaugurate the 'Bija [seed] Satyagraha'. In addressing the meeting, the noted ecologist Vandana Shiva stated: 'Just as Gandhiji had made salt at Dandi to announce non-cooperation with the unjust British Salt Laws, the Bija Satyagraha is an announcement of people's non-cooperation with the unjust patent laws that make seed saving by farmers a crime ...'⁸⁷ She went on to compare the movement against multinational corporations with the earlier struggle for freedom from British rule.

Gandhi's importance for the ecology movement has probably, however, lain most strongly in its use of non-violent forms of resistance. The Chipko and Narmada movements, which will be examined in Chapter 8, have been celebrated by environmentalists in many parts of the world, and the methods of resistance duplicated or used as an inspiration for further innovative forms of protest, such as establishing tree houses in threatened woods.^{[88](#)}