

Research Paper

Gandhi's Critique of Modernity: A Philosophical and Political Analysis

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Abstract

Modernity is the concept which is central to human life. This study is important because it share certain attitude and values. This paper aims to understand the idea of Gandhiji's critique on modernity. Information for my paper has been sourced from various books written by Gandhi and others, government publications, articles, newspapers etc. This paper is basically, exploratory in nature relying on secondary research such as reviewing available literature. These papers will also discussion about the critique of modernity by expressism, non-religious and religious groups, Islamic, Tagore's and Kant. It is found that Gandhiji's critique on modernity has touched almost all the aspect such as Modern Civilization, caste and women, colonialism and capitalism, quality of life and religion aspect, which are having relevance on 21st century. Again it is also found that critique is nothing but first of all is the critique of ourselves. At last it is can be concluded by stating that Gandhiji was a pre-modernist.

Keywords: Gandhi, Modernity, pre-modernist, Pro-modernity

(Received 04 19 2025; Accepted 07 06 2025)

1. Introduction

Modernity is the concept which is central to human life. It is the idea and phenomena of practice, which was originated in Western Europe. Sometimes it was resisted and sometimes it was welcomed by the people. Modernity is self critical unlike traditional. Intellectual composition of modernity comprises both conceptual and phenomenal aspect. Modernity came to Indian in the form of colonialism.

Modernity has emerged in 17th century in Europe, which is knows as early modernity. This period of modernity is as skeleton form. The latter modernity has started in 18th century. We can say it gives looks of blood and flesh to the skeleton of modernity. In this period modernity was in most aggressive form.

1.1. Importance or Significance of Modernity

It is important because it share certain attitude and values. It generally divides the world in two camps like pro modernity and anti modernity. Pro-modernity always welcomes modernity like liberation of oppression and other kind of bondage. Whereas anti modernity opposes the ideas. Modernity also divides the individuals in the society in to different groups. Again modernity can be divided into social modernity, economic modernity and political modernity. The social modernity is like emerging and disappearing of some characteristics of society such as emergence of intellectual groups, who were working as priest in the early

days in our society. Economic modernity is nothing but transformation of agrarian economy to industrial economy. Political economy is like emerging of separate state of church. Again the socio political modernity is central tenants of individualism, liberalism, democracy and nationalism.

Having discussed the importance or significance of modernity, the following is the objectives of the paper.

Objective

1. To understand the idea of Gandhiji's critique on modernity.

Information for my paper has been sourced from various books written by Gandhi and others, government publications, articles, newspapers etc. This paper is basically, exploratory in nature relying on secondary research such as reviewing available literature.

This paper is divided in to three parts in introduction part it has written the significance of modernity and the objective of my paper. In second part will deal with the critique of Expressism, Non-religious and religious critique, Islamic attack on Modernity, Tagore's attack on modernity, Kant's Critique on Modernity. In the third section I will present Gandhian critique on modernity. In the last section attempt will be made to put him as a pre-modernist with the arguments.

2. Critique on Modernity by Different Philosophers

In this section the critique of modernity by different philosophers will be discussed. Critique of modernity by Expressism,

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Cite this article: Ranjan Kumar Nayak, Gandhi's Critique of Modernity: A Philosophical and Political Analysis *International Journal of Applied Ethics* 11(2025), 31–36. <https://doi.org/>.

Non-religious and Religious critique, Marx's Attack on Modernity or Marxist Response to Modernity, Socio-political Critique of Modernity, Islamic Attack on Modernity and Kant's Critique on Modernity as follows.

2.1. Expressism Critique on Modernity

The critique of modernity came partially or fully as soon as it came to society. The first group who criticized modernity is expressism led by Johann Gottfried Herder. According to him expression is centre to any argument. The expressivity rejected the modernity on the argument that it undermines the communion between nature and man. They opposed the objectivity of nature. Expression was centre to this movement. They argued nature is a subjective phenomenon. Again they argued rationality is nothing but intuition. Man is like a expressing being not a subject. Human being is a communion in nature by expression. Man and nature separation is myth. Rationality is not hall mark of human being, it is intuition which is highest of all. On the other hand language is nothing but expression of symbol. Man was constitutes expressive unit on nature not subject of nature. They said man is not a disembodied rather Expressivism. Expressivism denied the idea of world as an object and the idea of man as a subject. They also rejected the rationality as the essence of man along with the modernist idea of science as highest exhibition of human creativity. This movement was extremely significant.

2.2. Non-religious and Religious Critique

Non-religious critiques of modernity are academically more popular than their religious counterparts. However, the religious critiques are no way less strong than nonreligious critique. One version of such religious critique of modernity is that of Tolstoy. He has expressed very brilliantly the aesthetic critique in his book "What is art?". According to him it is very difficult task to differentiate art from non-art and how to define art? "A common man would articulate that art is that which acknowledges beauty. What is beauty that constitutes the content of art?" (See what is Art? By Tolstoy, P.370)

2.3. Marx's Attack on Modernity or Marxist Response to Modernity

Marxist like Lucas made questions on modernity that, who can save us from modernity? Moreover Marxist idea on capitalist is bit ambiguous. His attack on capitalist i.e. did not go for destroy the capitalism. Capitalist didn't go for destroy which is guided by profit. But Marx tries for the total destroy of capitalist. It is like fasad. For Marx alienation is very important. Alienation should be overcome according to him. Capitalist system is the highest form in the society and need for sugarcoat. They promote alienation in the society. Overcoming alienation is central to Marx unlike modernity. The English poets call alienation is like "not feeling at home world". It is like a spiral condition being away from material state. It is a social condition. According to him the capitalism brings about three things they are class society, commodity production and division of production. They gave a spurious solution to genuine problem. Marx calls it as optimal solution but it is temporary or fake solution. Slowly capitalism becomes acute in the society. Human relation becomes commodity and understood as commodity. Human needs are transformed to market demands.

Labour is treated as commodity which can be bought and sold. Labour productivity is unique to man. The means of production and mode of production has enriched and leads to surplus, which is peculiarly a human activity. He also favoured the overcoming of alienation by middle man. Capitalism produces the useless things according to marks. He also argued that technology cannot be taken as progress. He measured modernity to be a philosophy of capitalist system which is sought to be made palatable by means of ideas like dignity of individual, democracy and secularism.

2.4. Hannha Arendt's Critique on Modernity

She highlighted about the Socio-political Critique of Modernity. According to her modernity swears by democracy. Modernity has all the seed for destroying democracy. Persons in modernity are like individual. They are free floating in nature. Modernity individuals are no cause to live for with sense of direction of life. They have no such ides or bond to nurture. It is absolutely empty life for them. These people are dictatorial in nature. They are rootless man like Nazism or Fasism. For example Hitlor who established authoritian state. She argued modern society is nothing but self destroying in nature.

2.5. Islamic Attack on Modernity

According to Islam, Modernity should be understood as a diverse and multifaceted process, not as a single, uniform concept. "Islamic modernists argued that Islam and modernity were compatible and asserted the need to reinterpret and reapply the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses to the political, scientific, and cultural challenges of the west and of modern life" (Esposito (2010)). Jamal al-Din (1838–97) is considered a leading figure in the early development of Islamic modernist thought. He maintained that Islam could coexist harmoniously with scientific inquiry and rational thought.

2.6. Tagore's Attack on Modernity

According to him modernity sometimes practices with wrong interpretations, can create larger distance between individual human beings, clans and countries. Modernity has not really been able to reduce functionalism to an extend we could really be comfortable living with as it apparent in the state world affair today (Michael Collins ,2011).Modernity humanism concept is a flawed concept.

2.7. Kant's Critique on Modernity

According to him Enlightenment marks the point at which an individual breaks free from immaturity caused by their own lack of courage or initiative. The central idea is to encourage independent thinking instead of remaining dependent and restrained. The Enlightenment represents an era of critical reflection. Kant played a key role in linking broader societal movements with profound philosophical inquiry. Modernity is often viewed as a historical era that emerged after the Enlightenment and is sometimes considered to be succeeded by the uncertain period of post-modernity. But Kant's clue is that it is instead an attitude. Baudelaire is taken as an illustration of modernity. Modernity itself widened a crack or contradiction about man. Man is subject and cannot study like nature. Again nothing can be excluded

ahead of science. They did not eliminate that man cannot study by science. According to Kant, man is a phenomenal self and nominal self. The phenomenal self can be solved by nature where as nominal self can not studied by nature.

Further Kant argued man has knowledge of nature outside him and knowledge of himself in nature. In nature external himself he seeks for truth; in himself he seeks for righteousness. The foremost is a concern of pure reason, the other of pragmatic reason. Besides these two means of observation, there is also the judging ability, which forms judgments without reasoning and generates happiness, without want. This capacity is the core of esthetic sense. Beauty, according to Kant, in its subjective meaning, is that which in universal and necessarily, without reasoning and without practical advantage, ; and in its objective meaning it is the form of an object appropriate for its purpose in so far as that object is perceived without any beginning of its utility(Kant p.379 and 147,1922).

3. Gandhi's Attack on Modernity

Before delving into Gandhiji's critique of modernity, it is important to first examine the perspectives offered by key scholars on the subject—Parekh's analysis of Gandhi's views, Hardiman's interpretation, the Rudolphs' explanation, and Roy's understanding. These viewpoints are outlined below.

3.1. Parekh's Analysis of Gandhi's Perspective on Modernity

In his book *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (1984), Bhikhu Parekh dedicates an important chapter to a detailed examination of Gandhi's critique of modernity. He approaches the subject from a fresh perspective and introduces several original interpretations. Parekh argues that Gandhi's criticism of modernity differs notably from that of European thinkers such as Ruskin, Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Karl Marx. This difference is twofold. First, unlike these European critics, both Gandhi and the Indian people experienced the direct consequences of modern civilization under British colonial rule. As a result, Gandhi was able to observe its darker aspects with greater clarity and personal insight. Second, rooted in the rich and ancient traditions of Indian civilization, Gandhi offered a deep and holistic intellectual viewpoint—something the European critics lacked.

In his work, *The Uniqueness of Gandhi's Thought* (2007), Bhikhu Parekh offers a remarkably balanced and insightful interpretation of Gandhi's critique of modern civilization. Parekh points out that Gandhi openly recognizes three major positive aspects of modernity: (a) its capacity for inquiry and relentless pursuit of truth, (b) the development of a more structured social order, and (c) its attempts to bring the natural world under human control. However, Gandhi also emphasizes that despite these achievements, modern civilization has failed to maintain a proper sense of balance in these areas.

3.2. Hardiman's Analysis of Gandhi's Views on Modernity

Hardiman is among the scholars who have undertaken a detailed analysis of Gandhi's critique of modernity. In his work *Gandhi:*

In His Time and Ours, he argues that Gandhi's critical perspective offers a framework for an alternative form of modernity. According to Hardiman, there is no fundamental opposition between the core values of modern civilization and those upheld by Gandhi. In fact, Gandhi aligned with several key elements of the modernist vision, such as human rights, the inherent equality of individuals, representative governance, universal suffrage, and a preference for democratic engagement and dialogue over authoritarian control or force.

3.3. Rudolphs' Elucidation on Gandhi's Critique on Modernity

In recent times, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have authored a new work titled *Post-modern Gandhi* (2006), which significantly builds upon themes from their earlier publication *The Modernity of Tradition*. Drawing on various elements of post-modernist theory, they argue that Gandhi can be viewed as a post-modern thinker, both historically and epistemologically. According to the Rudolphs, Gandhi was among the earliest intellectuals to question the core modernist belief in 'progress,' a concept later rejected by post-modern theorists. Gandhi's critical perspective on modernity, especially as expressed in *Hind Swaraj* (1997) and his subsequent writings, aligns with the themes of post-modern discourse. Therefore, he can be considered one of the early proponents of post-modernism from a historical standpoint.

3.4. Roy's Interpretation of Gandhi's Criticism of Modernity

In his two works, *Self and Society* and *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (1984), Roy offers a profound exploration of the issues surrounding Gandhi's thought. As one of the sharpest Indian critics of modernity, Roy engages deeply with modern European intellectual traditions to support his arguments. He emphasizes that Gandhi's critique of modernity is fundamentally distinct from other critiques in the field. According to Roy, the uniqueness of Gandhi's perspective lies in its foundation on a worldview where self-understanding is central. Moreover, unlike many other critics, Gandhi firmly rejects the conventional notion of 'progress'—a concept that has driven modern civilization. Thus, Gandhi's critique is both comprehensive and foundational. For him, true progress is rooted in self-realization. This significant shift redefines the individual not as a component of a larger system, but as an autonomous, self-defining being.

The true strength of Roy's interpretation of Gandhi's criticism of modernity lies in his ability to provide a well-reasoned intellectual foundation for comprehending it fully. His conclusions are grounded in an in-depth engagement with European philosophy, which underpins modern civilization. Additionally, he explores Indian philosophical traditions extensively to identify the genuine foundations of Gandhi's alternative vision.

According to Roy, Gandhi identifies the core sorrow of modern civilization in its insatiable desire for material wealth and refined indulgences. This pursuit, he argues, results in conditions of deprivation and dominance at both individual and global levels. Gandhi referred to this as a "satanic civilization." In contrast to Parekh and Hardiman, Roy interprets Gandhi's rejection of modernity as absolute—encompassing not only its principles but also its institutional structures and external manifestations.

3.5. Gandhiji's Critique on Modernity

He rejected modernity. According to Irfan Hobby, Gandhi wanted anti modernity. He argued you can not impose modernity on any one. On the one hand, some group interpret Gandhi as ultra-conservatives, several others like Ashish Nandi call him a critical conservatives. Gandhiji said modernity is exclusive in nature. We should marginalize the modernity. People should be saved from modernity. Gandhi argued that the Britishers's institutional and political institutions are fake. He was not against modern west but opposing his policies which was taking India to destroy herself. He said you may use railway or post, but do not think that it is the symbol as civilization. It destroys Swaraj or self rule.

When Britishers came to India, it divided Indian society in terms of class, caste, community and gender. If India would have not done these mistakes, British would not have held grip on us. This idea as alternative to modernity is derived from his theory of means and ends. Gandhi's perspective on the relationship between means and ends can be summarized through several interrelated yet distinct points. He emphasized that understanding and applying the right means is sufficient, as in his worldview, means and ends are essentially interchangeable. According to him, while we may not have control over the outcomes, we do have control over the methods we choose, and the degree of success we achieve is directly linked to the integrity of those methods. Contrary to the common saying that "means are just means," Gandhi asserted that "means are everything"—the nature of the end is shaped by the nature of the means. (See *Means and Ends in Politics* by Raghavan N. Iyer, 1973). Reflecting on this principle, one could argue that modernity begins fundamentally as a critique of ourselves.

Modern civilization is largely driven by materialistic values. As a result, it remains constantly focused on exploring the resources and principles of the physical world to satisfy its growing desire for wealth and sensory gratification. This unending quest for material advancement fosters intense competition, ranging from individuals to global powers. In doing so, it gives rise to violence and perpetuates systems of oppression, exploitation, and control. Consequently, this dynamic often culminates in colonial and imperial pursuits aimed at securing markets for manufactured goods and sourcing inexpensive raw materials for industrial needs. He further suggested that it wasn't a lack of technical knowledge that prevented the invention of machinery in earlier times. Rather, our ancestors understood that the pursuit of such advancements could lead to moral decay and spiritual enslavement. After careful reflection, they chose to limit human activity to what could be accomplished using one's own physical effort. Those who have embraced Western ways have, in turn, become subjugated by them. We tend to judge the entire universe by our limited and flawed standards—believing that if we are enslaved, so must be the rest of the world. In this context, machinery stands as a central emblem of modern civilization and symbolizes a profound moral wrongdoing. Assuming that an Indian version of Rockefeller would be morally superior to his American counterpart is misguided. "While a poor India can strive toward genuine freedom, a wealthy India built on unethical foundations would struggle to reclaim true liberty" (H S, p. 89).

It is equally evident that the real measure of progress lies in how individuals within such a society prioritize physical comfort and material well-being as the ultimate goal of life. They live in well-constructed homes, dress in formal attire, carry firearms, cultivate vast lands using mechanized tools like steam engines, and

have the capacity to accumulate vast amounts of wealth. In this setup, human physical effort becomes nearly obsolete—people can access conveniences simply by pressing buttons (H S, p. 32). In earlier times, conflicts were settled through direct physical confrontation. Today, a single individual can annihilate thousands while operating a weapon from a distant hill. Where once people labored outdoors at their own pace, modern systems force masses of workers into factories and mines, often risking their lives in hazardous conditions, all for the benefit of a handful of wealthy industrialists.

In the past, individuals were forced into slavery through physical coercion. Today, however, they are bound by the lure of wealth and the comforts it can provide. Modern society now faces illnesses that were previously unknown, prompting a vast medical workforce to seek treatments, which has consequently led to a significant rise in the number of hospitals (H S, p. 32). This form of civilization disregards both moral values and spiritual beliefs. Its primary focus is on enhancing physical comfort, yet it falls short even in achieving that goal. It has deeply influenced European societies to the extent that people immersed in it often seem irrational or disturbed. They appear to lack genuine physical vitality or bravery, relying instead on intoxication to maintain their energy. "This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed" (H S, page 33). We further strengthens their hold by quarrelling amongst ourselves. "They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods" (H S, page 37). "It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It is groaning under the monster's terrible weight" (H S, page 38).

"Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country so much so that, if we do not wake up in time, we shall be ruined. Railways have increased the frequency of famines because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people seal out their grain and it is sent to dearest markets" (H S, page 41). "Railways accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity" (H S, page 42).

He contrasted He emphasized aligning modern civilization with ethical living, firmly believing that India's and the East's true strength rests in their moral foundations. For him, maintaining and nurturing the ethical values of both individuals and institutions was of utmost significance. However, a major challenge arises in persuading people of the negative aspects of modern civilization—especially since even the educated have begun to accept and support it. Gandhi firmly believed that the Western civilization and the increase in violence was closely intertwined. He firmly believed that industrial civilization and the principle of nonviolence were fundamentally opposed and could not exist together.

Gandhi aimed to clarify the true essence of Swaraj. To him, Swaraj represented a journey of personal and moral growth. He interpreted *Indian Home Rule* (1909) as governance rooted in *dharma*, an ideal form of rule guided by ethical principles. At the heart of this vision was simplicity, which Gandhi believed to be essential for moral living and a sense of human solidarity. He argued that modern civilization, with its focus on material accumulation, eroded ethical values. The relentless pursuit of wealth, in his view, weakened people's moral character and hindered the holistic development of individuals. Gandhi maintained that morality and ethical conduct are crucial for social unity and harmony—qualities he found lacking in modern Western civilization, which he criticized for its obsession with wealth at

any cost. Gandhi desired culture but rejected civilization, viewing it as the primary source of modern society's problems. Gandhi closely analyzed the character of British colonial rule and sought to understand its underlying causes. Through this inquiry, he came to the conclusion that the core issue was not just colonialism but modern civilization itself. In his view, modern civilization posed a greater threat than colonial domination. He believed that many of India's problems stemmed from embracing the values and practices of modernity.

3.5.1. Gandhiji's Observation Religion Aspect

Religion is valuable to me and my first complaint is that India is flattering irreligious. Here I am not viewing of the Hindu or the Mohammedan or the Zoroastrian religion but of that religion which underlies all religions. "We are turning away from god" (H S, page 38). Hinduism, Christianity Zoroastrianism, Islam, and all other religions teach that we should remain passive about sophisticated pursuits and lively about religious pursuits, that we should set a boundary to our sophisticated want and that our religious objective should be infinite.

3.5.2. Gandhiji's Observation on Women and Caste

To be precise, Gandhi's observation on caste and women issues were varying with time though residual untouched in its center. Gandhi's argument for the equal treatment of women and those labeled as untouchables is grounded in the belief that all individuals share a basic human equality, making them independent moral beings who deserve equal dignity and respect. "Untouchability is not endorsed by religion; rather, it is a harmful practice rooted in evil intentions. Even the wicked have used sacred texts to justify their actions, but no scripture can override truth and rational thought." (Young India, 19-1-21, p.22).

3.5.3. Value of Life

In today's world, human beings are increasingly yielding control to machines, as technology takes a central role in shaping daily life. Western thought often associates civilization with industrial advancement and typically separates nations into "civilized" and "uncivilized" categories—effectively distinguishing between the wealthy and the impoverished. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi offered a profoundly different view of development. For him, civilization was not about claiming one's rights but about fulfilling one's responsibilities. Gandhi believed that genuine civilization encourages individuals to live by ethical and moral duties.

3.5.4. Capitalism and Colonialism

Gandhi believed that the root cause of colonialism lay in the foundations of modernity. Unlike Lenin, who associated colonialism with capitalism, Gandhi directly connected it to the very essence of modernity. He concluded that modern civilization was fundamentally driven by brute force. In his view, even for Western societies, modernity represented a harmful force. Gandhi perceived colonialism as a direct outcome of modernity, a reality he believed everyone must come to understand.

In his philosophical writings, Gandhi extensively explored the concepts of Swaraj and civilization. He emphasized the ineffectiveness of violent revolutions and strongly advocated for non-violent methods as the rightful path to achieving independence.

Deeply concerned about the younger generation, he also underscored the importance of reforming the education system.

Gandhi urged Indians to embrace technologies that were suitable for the nation's specific needs, firmly rejecting the Western model of industrialization. He also offered a range of practical suggestions aimed at moderates, extremists, the emerging middle class, and the British. Gandhi strongly believed that true Swaraj could only be achieved through a revitalized and reformed Indian civilization. Furthermore, he clearly differentiated between Swaraj as self-rule based on moral and cultural autonomy, and Swaraj as mere political self-governance or home rule. As modern civilization progressed, people began to experience its adverse effects—particularly the exploitation and suffering of countless individuals. This form of development, Gandhi observed, was eroding the traditional value systems of Indian society.

No doubt, the other factors that undermined India and tightened the English hold were the existing caste system and dominated situation of women, which further alienated the Indian society and delayed the achievement of Swaraj.

4. Was Gandhi a Pre-modernist?

By citing the following points it can be said that Gandhi was a pre-modernist. His opposition to law courts, contemporary medicine, and modern education reflects a mindset rooted in pre-modern thinking. These views led even his close associates, such as Nehru and Patel, to distance themselves from many of his ideas while shaping a modern vision for post-independence India. He dismissed science and technology, questioned the legitimacy of representative institutions, criticized industrial development, and challenged the role of rational, goal-oriented thinking in human progress. This sharp and often one-sided critique of modern civilization illustrates his strong desire to reverse the course of historical advancement.

5. Conclusion:

The above are the discussion about the critique of modernity by expressism, non-religious and religious groups, Islamic, Tagore's and Kant. It is found that Gandhiji's critique on modernity has touched almost all the aspect such as Modern Civilization, caste and women, colonialism and capitalism, quality of life and religion aspect, which are having relevance on 21st century. Again it is also found that critique is nothing but first of all is the critique of ourselves. At last it can be concluded by stating that Gandhiji was a pre-modernist.

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