



Nature, Morality and the Self: A Gandhian Perspective on Walden

Dr Alka Sharma

Associate Professor in English

Govt PG College for Women, Sector 14, Panchkula

Email id alkasharmabose@gmail.com

This paper examines Henry David Thoreau's Walden through a Gandhian perspective, highlighting the shared critique of modern civilization by both thinkers. Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi rejected the materialistic, mechanized nature of modernity which they viewed as morally and spiritually degenerative, despite its superficial comforts. Drawing from their philosophies, the study argues that modernity remains an "incomplete project" unless it integrates the ethical, cultural and philosophical values of traditional life. Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond embodied self-reliance, simplicity and harmony with nature, paralleling Gandhi's austere lifestyle at Sabarmati Ashram. Both emphasized the three necessities like food, shelter and clothing which are free from excess and promoted vegetarianism, manual labour and minimalism as pathways to spiritual elevation. While not rejecting all aspects of modern civilization, they contended that technological progress without moral advancement enslaves rather than liberates. This paper asserts that true civilization lies in moral conduct, self-restraint and the pursuit of inner contentment over external luxury. By blending the best aspects of modernity with the enduring values of tradition, humanity can avoid the self-destructive tendencies of materialism and achieve genuine happiness and progress.

Keywords: Thoreau, Gandhi, modernity, simplicity, tradition

Henry David Thoreau, like Mahatma Gandhi, had a critical approach towards the so-called 'modernity'. They, both, preferred to live a happy and elevated life than to live in decadent society, a society which is vulgar and unprincipled because of materialistic attitude towards life. They considered luxuries and the so-called comforts of life to be definite hurdles to the elevation of mankind. And that is why, they appreciated the old traditional ways of life of the ancient philosophers and the teachings of the great Hindu sages. So, according to them, who is needed is a voluntary poverty since money cannot buy one necessary of the soul. Both of them, put their beliefs into practice. They spent their lives at such places which were far away from the materialistic life of cities or "modern world" as Gandhi lived in 'Sabarmati Ashram' and Thoreau at 'Walden Pond.'

Now the question arises: "What is Modernity?"

The word "modern" comes from Latin "modernus" and was used for the first time in the late fifth centuries to distinguish the present which was dominated by Christian Ideology, from the

Roman and pagan past. In his ideology, from the essay, "Modernity - An incomplete Project," Jürgen Habermas defines modernity in the context of tradition by affirming the essentially benevolent agenda of modernity to improve the existing state of civilization.

I want to argue in my essay or paper that modernity will always remain an "incomplete project" till it is blended with the good old values of our tradition, our cultural-philosophical heritage. Thoreau's *Walden* is a compendium in which he has expressed his self-reliant individuality rather than social conventions, simplicity and idealism instead of materialism, and friendship with nature instead of human society. These were the basis of his values as he wanted to lead his life in his own way. He merges the philosophies of the East and the West, of the past and the present to make a way of life, through impractical, gives the best hope for the disenchanted, drifting and frustrated individuals. R.K. Srivastava has aptly expressed his theory as the theme of the novel "an artist who wants to pursue his own calling without becoming a slave to a materialistic society, must live austerely, and not despite manual labour." And this was Gandhian theory of literature. As due to similarities about the criticism of modernity between Gandhiji and Thoreau, I have decided to write this paper on *Walden* through Gandhian point of view.

Although Gandhiji and Thoreau are against modern civilization but not in totality. They accept that "the true test of civilization lies in the fact that people living in it man like bodily welfare the objects of life. As the people live in better-built houses than they did a hundred years ago. They are improved now. But the civilization has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created places but it was not so easy to create noblemen the kings" (Economy, shelter, p.32).

Formerly, people wear skins and used to spears as their weapons but now they were a variety of clothing and instead of spheres they carry with them revolvers. Earlier people ploughed their land mainly by manual labour but now one man can plough a tractor by means of a steam engine. Men worked in the open air according to their liking. Now a meeting for the sake of maintenance work in factories and mind. Their condition is worse than 20 millionaires force them to work at most dangerous occupations at the risk of their life. They are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxury that money can buy full stop Mahatma Gandhi comments on this civilization

This is considered the height of Civilization. It has been stated that, as men progress, they shall Be able to travel in airship and reach any part of the world in a few hours. 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. And thirdly, a motor-car will be waiting for them. They will have a variety of delicately dished up food. Everything will be done by machinery.

In the same manner Thoreau also commented: "He has no time to be anything but a machine" (Economy, p.4), Gandhi and Thoreau both attack the ruthless mechanisation of human life under the project of "modernity" which, according to them, is creating a false decadent civilization in the world. The true civilization, according to Gandhiji, is:

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 passion. So doing, we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilization means "good conduct."

But now, in the modern world, the very meaning of civilization has been distorted. In this world, the immorality is often taught in the name of morality. Although modern civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts but it fails miserably even in doing so as far one comfort it provides, it engenders scores of disasters elsewhere. For example, the production of refrigerators and air-conditioners constantly depletes the ozone layer-making the world prey to the UV-radiation. Thoreau, like Mahatma Gandhi, wanted to lead a simple and elevated life, far from this modern world of immorality. And that is why, he passed most of his life near Walden Pond. As he says in the novel:

I went to the Woods because I wished to live
Deliberately, to front only the essential facts
of life, and see if I could not learn what it had
to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover
that I had not lived.... I wanted to live deep and
suck out all the marrow of life, to live so
sturdily and Spartan like as to put to rout all
that was not life,....

(What I Lived For, p.89).

Thoreau is no habitual sermonizer; he lived what he preached. For the growth of human soul, one needs the minimum of bodily comforts as R.K. Srivastava says in the introduction to *Walden* - "To strip life of inessentials and prune one's wants were the prerequisites of a simple life" (p. xvii). He considered the so-called comforts of life to be definite hurdles to elevation of mankind. He maintained only three necessities of life: food, shelter, and clothing. In the very first chapter, *Economy* of the novel, he says:

... of all that man obtains by his own extractions
has been from the first, or from the long use has
become, so important to human life that few, if
any, weather from savageness or poverty, or
philosophy ever attempt to do without it
(necessary of life).

(*Economy*, p.10)

According to Thoreau, food is as necessary to the human body as fuel to a machine as Gandhi called it "Food is life". From It, a man can get sufficient warmth for his survival and daily

activities. Thoreau objected to it only when it became an instrument for slavery, luxury and pride forgetting its main function. He refused many invitations to dinner because he had the fear that elaborate meals might be served. He grew vegetables, made his sugar himself, tried to eat acorns and rice and this he wanted from others also. His suggestion was of having one instead of three meals a day, five instead of a hundred dishes, and vegetarian instead of non-vegetarian food. He even claimed that he can live on "board nails". And this is what Mahatma Gandhi has emphasized. According to Thoreau, vegetarian food was simple and could be got easily. But animal food was got largely by evil methods hunting, fishing, killing -and hence was evil in itself. One's sensibilities, bred sensuality and intemperance, is dulled and the attainment of spiritual elevation is hindered by this kind of food.

He preferred to drink water than wine. He had a little cutlery as one spoon, two knives and forks, a pair of tongs, a kettle, a skillet, a frying pan, dipper, a cup, and a wash-bowel. These were all the most necessary things. He did not have anything extra.

The second necessity, according to him is shelter which is necessary for protection from the heat, cold, rain and snow. Like Greenough, he was in opposition to the construction of luxurious palaces as habitations, of the churches that went up into the sky 'against gravitation'. He preferred simple and unpretentious dwellings. He himself says:

I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all
to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion.
I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart with a
free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy
car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria
all the way.

(Economy, Shelter, p.35)

Although now men live in better-built or improved houses, they themselves have not equally improved from their earlier stage. Here Thoreau puts a question:

And if the civilized man's pursuits are no
worthier than the savages, if he is employed the
greater part of his life in obtaining gross
necessaries and comforts merely, why should he
have a better dwelling than the former?

(Economy, Shelter, p.32)

Thoreau, himself, made a cabin at Walden Pond which cost only about twenty-eight dollars to build. It was small, tightly shingled and plastered, ten by fifteen feet long with two windows, two trap-doors, and a fireplace. His furniture, part of which he made himself, consisted of a bed, a table, three chairs, a deck and a looking glass. He considered the doormat to be the first step to luxury -the beginning of evil and so he refused it. What he felt about his cabin that it housed him whereas luxurious buildings often imprisoned their inmates. And by living in such a cabin, he propagated in

the world the advantages of simple life, Mahatma Gandhi himself spent all his life in a simple way as he lived in an "ashram" which is devoid of luxuries and show-off.

The third necessity is clothing, according to Thoreau. Clothing is what hides man's nakedness and preserves his bodily heat. Thoreau, like Gandhiji, did not like having a variety of clothes. He scoffed at the people who were having the drawers full of clothes. He called them clothes horses. As he says:

Kings and queens who wear a suit but once, though
made by some tailor or dress - maker to their
majesties, cannot know the comfort of wearing a
suit that fits. They are no better than wooden
horses to hang the clean clothes on

(Economy, Clothing, p.19)

In his point of view, no man ever stood the lower his estimation for having a patch in his clothes as the main purpose of clothes, that is, to hide the nakedness of men, is completed. In this modern world, a man is supposed to be civilized if he starts wearing a variety of clothes out of savagery, but this is not correct as clothes cannot qualify man's greatness or smallness, which is determined by his inherent qualities. Gandhiji himself used to wear only a "dhoti" on him and advises others also to do this. And as he preferred manual labour always, he propagated the khadi clothes (hand-made clothes) made by himself on his "charkha". This really simplicity in this fashionable modern world. a height of

So, by propagating simple, contented and elevated life, Thoreau, like Mahatma Gandhi, wants to say that although the modern civilization has made man in a better comfortable position than earlier, but he has lost the real happiness, the real physical and mental strength. He has become a machinery now. He has become a tool of the tools. This modern civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed. Someone correctly has called it as "Satanic Civilization". Hinduism calls it the "Black Age". But if we maintain our old traditions, our old precious values, morals then we will be able to live this life otherwise we will waste it. According to Gandhiji:

It is a rule of ideal morality that it is not
enough to follow the trodden path. We ought to
follow the path which we know to be true, whether
it is familiar or unfamiliar to us. . . . That is why
true morality, true civilization and true progress
are always to be found together.

And the same has been done by those two great men. They propagated the old traditions, the old values and simplicity except to go after the glamour of this modern world. These old morals are the basis of good living otherwise the life becomes hell, totally immoral. Without these values, one

cannot get the real happiness. He cannot enjoy his life fully. He cannot be contented at heart, because mind is a restless bird: the more it gets the more it wants, and remains unsatisfied.

So, to get the real happiness in this modern world, one must remember all the values, morals. Without these values, this modern civilization will be an "incomplete project". So, Thoreau, like Mahatma Gandhi, emphasised that one should blend the two things, that is, the modernity and the good old values in order to enable us to cope with the daily-increasing pressures of modernity.

Works Cited

Gandhi, "Ideal Morality" in The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, ed. Shriman Narayan. Vol. IV, rep. in 1995.

Gandhi, "What is true civilization?" in The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, ed. Shriman Narayan, Vol. IV, rep. in 1995, (Ahmedabad-14: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968), p.160.

Henry David Thoreau, Walden. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982. All the subsequent references are to this text with the name of chapter and page Nos, in parentheses.

Jurgan Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in Post-Modern Culture, ed. by Hal Foster London: Pluto, 1985, p.10.

Mahatma Gandhi, "Civilization" in The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, ed. Shriman Narayan, Vol. IV, rep. in 1995, Ahmedabad-14: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968, p.119.

R.K. Srivastava, "Introduction" to Walden, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).