

BOOK REVIEW -III

Madhuri Santanam Sondhi, *Modernity, Morality and The Mahatma*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications Pvt, Ltd, 1997. 254pp. ISBN 81-241-0565-0 (hardback).

"This above all, to refuse to become a victim" Margaret Atwood

Gavin de Becker in his now much-publicised book, *The Gift of Fear* advocates a practical philosophy to avoid victimhood. This is a lesson which Indian commentators have failed to recognise in their assessment of India's achievements or deficiencies over the last fifty years. The basic ingredients of modernity and morality enumerated with reference to the Mahatma, Aurobindo and Mallik could not have come at a more appropriate time. Dr. Sondhi provides an excellent overview of the ethical considerations of the processes and institutions of modernity. The overriding concern of this book is the degradation of the moral quality of social and public life in contemporary India, in the context of the Gandhian heritage.

Dr. Sondhi provides an interesting summary of *modernity* as perceived by Gandhi, Aurobindo and Mallik. Whereas, Gandhi's synthesis of ideas about the transformation of spirit to a higher level of purpose was based on *dharma*. Aurobindo's synthesis of matter and spirit called for a distinctively universal quest and for spiritual regeneration. Here, the construction of a moral sense eschews a specific epistemological position, whereby a philosophical viewpoint dictates an ontology of purpose and action. This book reiterates the visceral qualities of the problematic of modernity fifty years after India's Independence. These issues become all the more relevant when tolerance of plurality has been consigned to the rubbish bin of the past and all forms of righteousness have been patented and orchestrated as another form of *Swadeshi*. In the last year we have witnessed a number of events that have caught the popular imagination of

the common public, for example, the controversial play *Mi Nathuram Godse Boltoy* which justifies the assassination of Gandhi. While few would distance themselves from what Gandhi stood for, fewer still would like to practice what he preached. Indeed, the image of Mahatma Gandhi has undergone a metamorphosis, from being declared an *avant-garde* prophet of post-modernism, to being one who has been condemned as having forced a "cogeaed mass of atavistic aspirations and prejudices to surface in the minds Indians and non-Indians alike" (Chaudhuri, 1997; Dasgupta, 1997).

The book is divided into four main chapters. Chapter I sets up the *Problematic of Modernity*, and then serves as the basis by which to evaluate the issues of modernity in India.

It is no doubt true that at the end of the twentieth century, we have been reduced to societal polarisation between a transplanted modernity and a defensive traditionalism. Here the author skilfully navigates through the Gellnerian eurocentric discourses of modernity. However, only the problematic of modernity is developed and one would have expected a more completely-reasoned critique as well, given the current topical emphasis on post-modernism. The monster of modernity is flogged as usual, as being self-defeating in social, cultural and human affairs (p.26). Can social violence be attributed only to modernisation and urbanisation? To equate modernity largely with imperial humiliation would lead to an essentialist viewpoint and would deny all civilisational advances till date (p.30). A systematic critique of modernity should embrace many more of the philosophical paradoxes underlying the modernist enterprise. In a sense, Gandhi decried the shift from the absolute, from Truth to method. After all, the primacy accorded science is out of proportion to its capacity to provide answers. Can philosophy replace science? The recent debates around realist positions (Bhaskar, 1989; Sayers, 1997) are cases in point. That science demands rationality, but is not defined by it, is a wonderful example of the limitations of method. Indian modernity has been characterised as a reaction against religion and its cultural attributes. Imperialism, having introduced individualism, tended to de-legitimise culture as well as traditional philosophy. Post-modernism is an essential reaction to this critique.

Chapter II, provides the *Gandhian Point of Departure*. This is based

on the critique of modernity as provided by Gandhi himself in *Hind Swaraj*. The canvas is a metaphysical setting, within which the critique of modernity is applied on the basis of religion, morality and politics. A particularly useful summary is provided (pp. 115-117) on the political philosophy of modernity and Gandhi's departure from it. There is a clear elaboration of Gandhi's experiments in India. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* focuses on these issues in an indirect manner. While Gandhi sought to democratise Indian politics, he was not able to moralise the same in any measure. This has been reflected in the recent precipitous decline in the Indian polity, where probity, morality and truth were last on the agenda of public and private action. Gandhi's fixation with a moral civilisation, located in the rural regions of India, remained for him transfixed in time and space. However, even during his own lifetime, rural India was undergoing rapid transformation and could no longer be idealised as a moral landscape.

Chapter III, places *Gandhi's* ideas of *Modernity* in the context of his two contemporaries, *Aurobindo and Mallik*. This is a rich and insightful chapter and provides much scope for future analysis. It is an excellent precursor to the debates on post-modernism and end of capitalism currently being discussed throughout the social sciences and humanities. Gandhi, as a conservationist, wanted to retain the best of the past traditions and introduce limited doses of modernity in a moral society. Aurobindo was both spiritual and cultural, whereas Gandhi's philosophy was moral and socio-political. While there have been numerous studies of Aurobindo, by contrast, Mallik's thought has received little attention to date. Mallik was, however more interested in locating the problematic in a philosophical and social theory of history. He was more structural in his analysis and focused on the primacy of agency in transforming these structures. The peculiarity of the Mallikean position of holding individualism as the root cause of all ills of both Hindu and Muslim identity is an exciting alternative to the existing staid arguments. Mallik's individuals embody reality, not in an absolutist sense, but rather as part of the interdependent or *dependent origination* sense.

Chapter IV sets out the *Ethical Dynamism and the future society*. This chapter is designed towards a normative prognosis, and presents a somewhat prescriptive agenda for the future of India. A Gandhian approach toward the

reconstruction of a moral society is advocated here. The author sets the terms for a debate on the contentious issues of gender, moral society, non-violence, extreme religiosity, of national purpose, for and against industrialisation and of rural-mindedness, and concerning village republics (in a Mainean vein).

However, a few caveats need to be noted. First, the contention of this study has been that the rationale which inspired a critique of modernity in *Hind Swaraj* is still applicable to India. However, given that Gandhi, Nehru and Jayprakash Narayan have become irrelevant to the modern generation, how can fairness and welfare be guaranteed by the state or by individuals (working for the state), with an heightened sense of social responsibility? Secondly, is it possible to establish moral renewal along with political freedom and economic growth, where corruption has become a national pastime? Can self regulation be introduced in any viable form? Thirdly, is there really any scope for a common moral space? And if so, can it be determined where it is to be located, or how it is to be created? Particularism of all kinds (especially Hindu and Muslim), has reared its ugly head from time to time. How far is it realistic to fit everything into the ambit of a moral space? Fourthly, would a greater redistribution of material goods reduce forms of violence against women, minorities and individuals who desire a liberal co-existential space in a democratic India? Finally, there is no doubt that, along with its neighbours, India has been more particularistic in values that are traditional, rather than espousing a universalistic identity.

Indeed, as Oommen states," the hegemonising tendency of globalisation leads to a resurrection of roots of identity, of traditionalism, where religious fundamentalism becomes predominant form of cultural relativism". The current danger to which we are exposed is one where a plurality of traditions is continually forced into a monolithic straight-jacket of intolerance. "The conflict between tradition and modernity is a conflict between hegemonic tradition and a hegemonising tendency of modernity" (Oommen, 1998). Is there a need to undermine traditional groups, both in the rural and urban space which still exhibit mutual trust even in worst circumstances?

The author ends on an emphatic, optimistic note that "the goal of India's freedom was not to make a near total shift from India's civilisational past, but to enhance her spiritual and material order." This nostalgic assessment of the past

resonates with the questions of social and economic dignity, cultural creativity, and spiritual integrity. The moot point is whether any of these can be achieved without an adequate and correct philosophical outlook. Ultimately, philosophy allows us to pose the right questions and elicit the answers appropriate to the social and moral dilemmas we face as we move towards the twenty-first century. Our history, as in the West, is replete with examples of hedonistic lifestyles and to deny it leads to a rather antifoundational historical stance. Identity, as Sen (1998) has remarked, is in no way fragile or a unique attribute, which can be destroyed by cultural invasion. Our commitment to democracy, pluralism and tolerance is the only way to assert cultural identity and values in rapidly globalising world. Can we refuse to become victims of the current forms of traditionalism and of cultural relativism unleashed in most parts of the world today? I think this book offers us possibilities for the future.

M.SATISH KUMAR

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