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COVID ASKS US TO HEED GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES OF SWADESHI, SWACHHATA AND SARVODAYA

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Contributions of Moral thinkers and philosophers from India

[COVID-19](#) is a wake-up call for the postmodern world. In line with the adage “every problem is an opportunity in disguise”, the present dramatic scenario of [pandemic](#) proportions spotlights the relevance of [Mahatma Gandhi](#)’s clarion call (articulated in his 1909-manifesto Hind Swaraj) to extricate ourselves from the mesmerisation of modernity. He even went as far as to discredit modernity’s alleged civilisational status as a “disease” to which we must endeavour not to fall victim. Whether this can be deemed an illustration of prophetic prescience or not, in any case, Gandhiji’s vituperative phraseology — admittedly constituting part of a polemical diatribe with the aim of subverting the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise, epitomised by his criticism of the railways (targeted strikingly as carriers and spreaders of epidemic disease!), law courts, modern medicine and English education — embodies for us today an uncanny significance as the virus spreads exponentially and the death toll is on the rise.

With modernity’s shining gloss getting unmasked as a deceptive mirage, it is dawning on us that our globalised lifestyle has made us weaker than ever (from a Gandhian perspective morally as well as physically). Admittedly, free trade, cheaper flights and social media have brought us closer than ever, but they are also making us more vulnerable. What is more, mass hysteria is on the rise as rumours and fake news are spreading faster than the virus. And yet, the primary victims are the “first world” including India’s and the South’s upwardly striving jet-setting elite, who until now enjoyed the specious privilege of living in an age of unparalleled sophistication, freedom and comfort, claiming supremacy over the natural world and mastery of science.

Yet with jeremiads blasting in the media that we are only a step or two away from disaster, not only the hubris of post-modernity (boasting to have conquered disease, etc.) but also its scourge of criminal injustice — in view of the glaring social and economic disparity — is exposed as the killer virus’s onslaught threatens the lives of unsuspecting millions living in extremely vulnerable conditions.

Confronted with this ominous scenario, let us recall Gandhiji’s allegorical premonition in a letter to [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) (October 5, 1945). He wrote: “When the moth approaches its doom it whirls round faster and faster till it is burnt up. It is possible that India will not be able to escape this moth-like circling. It is my duty to try, till my last breath, to save India and through it the world from such a fate.”

Gandhiji’s forebodings should summon us to urgently adopt a new mindset. Guided by his inspirational example, we are called upon to chart out a viable alternative model of polity that could extricate us from the contemporary impasse. His roadmap of integrating economics, politics and technology with ethics (all the while foregrounding the Daridranarayan’s well-being) can function as our sheet anchor in these precarious times.

More immediately, to mitigate the spread of the virus, for which allopathic medicine offers no cure, we should model ourselves on Gandhiji, the indomitable experimenter in naturopathy, to use effective preventive treatment (and household remedies), practise excellent personal hygiene, promote and ensure community sanitation, and restrict ourselves to our localities, avoiding long-distance travel and attendance at public assemblies.

In short, the Gandhian principles of *swadeshi*, *swachhata* and *sarvodaya* should be our

guidelines. More comprehensively, rather than indulging in a globalised lifestyle, we should endeavour to respond to Gandhiji's call for putting into practice a unique variant of "glocalisation" — learning to experience the entire world within the precincts of our immediate village or neighbourhood (in line with the Upanishadic dictum *viswam prushtam grame asmin anaathuram*), and to live in harmony with our environment, eschewing exploitative practices as far as possible.

Last but not least, in view of the catastrophic disruption caused in the global economy, this would be the ideal moment to focus on regenerating our rural economy to bring about Gandhi's cherished dream of gram swaraj. Indeed in following his dictum "Be the change you want to see in the world" through "simple living and high thinking", each of us can make our contribution towards redeeming humanity and Planet Earth and thereby, pay homage to the Mahatma.

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