CHAPTER – VI
CONCLUSION

In retrospect, what we set out to do in this thesis has been concerned with augmenting innovative resources for a reflective search on Gandhi’s understanding on caste, gender and modernity. It is evident from the previous chapters that Caste–system on close examination discloses a number of characteristics, which needs our critical appraisal and reflection. It envisages a definite fixity of membership in a hereditary system. Birth is regarded as a unilateral determination of one’s caste. It is in practice a hierarchical relationship. What followed, then, is that caste at this stage was based on the nature of the occupation of the individual. There were restrictions pertaining to inter-marriage and inter-dinning and a sense of pollution and purity governed the relations among castes. The cruel practices of caste rules have produced the pernicious habit of keeping millions as untouchables and unapproachable. The crime of untouchability is said to be made punishable by statutes of the government. But what we need is to bring such a spirit in the lives of persons in the society.

Gandhi himself was busy in abolishing this evil practice of the Hindu society. He did not allow anyone to be an untouchable. Consequently, he laid emphasis on the purification of caste. The purification of caste depends upon the abolition of untouchability. As soon as untouchability ends, caste system is purified and the true conception of Varnashramadharma, the four divisions of the society, will come to radiance. Gandhi is not opposed to caste system. He maintains that the four divisions of caste are complementary to one another, and none inferior or superior to any other. Caste was to Gandhi an extension of the principle of the family, as both were governed by blood and heredity. He stated that caste was essential for the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress, but he wanted that it must not connote superiority or inferiority. It must only recognize different outlooks and corresponding modes of life. But castes as an institution had degenerated to a great extent and have stratified social life on
the basis of caste, which has become the order of the day. Therefore, for Gandhi, the practice of caste was not in consonance with its theory. It indicates the possibility to argue that Gandhi seems to nowhere compromise that the varna-system (read as the caste system) has done any wrong to the society. But if we closely study the work of Ambedkar, we find that Gandhi seems to be living in an idealized world where he wants the reform in the society should come from the upper caste Brahmins. What followed, then, is a critiquing itself where one is constrained to state that Gandhi seems to be biased in his approach towards caste hierarchy. In other words, Gandhi gives no space to the active participation of the outcaste or the untouchables for their emancipation.

Gandhi issued a series of press statements and a stream of letters to his numerous correspondents to educate the people on the evil of untouchability. He arranged for the publication of a weekly paper, Harijan, to promote his campaign. ‘Harijan’ means ‘children of God’; ¹ it was Gandhi’s name for the outcastes, the untouchables. All the religions of the world, Gandhi wrote, describe God pre-eminently the friend of the friendless and help of the helpless, and the protector of the weak. Gandhi doubted whether there was any support for untouchability in the Hindu Scriptures. But even if it were possible to cite a sanction for this tyranny from any ancient manuscript, Gandhi did not feel bound by it. Eternal truths, he asserted, could not be confined within the covers of a book, however sacred it might be. Every scripture had contained certain universal truths, but it also included injunctions relevant to the contemporary society; the latter, if they did violence to human dignity, could be ignored.

Here it is important to discuss Ambedkar’s views in which he critiques Gandhi’s views on caste, religion and its consequences for untouchables and Indian society at large. In modern times, Ambedkar emerged as a powerful philosopher and political leader to philosophize the Indian social reality from Dalit perspective and led different struggles to liberate dalits from the clutches of the caste system. As a pragmatic thinker, he has devised many strategies for the emancipation of dalits.
Ambedkar’s philosophy is essentially ‘ethical’ and ‘religious’. He worked out social relations and politics from the point of morality. His idea of democracy based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity are derived from Buddhism. His conception of religion is humanistic rather than authoritative and God centered. His religion is civilized rather than antique and is rationalistic and based on irrational faith. Thus, his religion is not discriminatory. He is concerned more about the philosophy of religion rather than mere religion. He has visualized the source for politics and law in the religion, which is moral. The pragmatic thinker, John Dewey, and the British intellectual and conservative thinker Edmund Burke influenced him to place religion in political discourse. Among the historical religions, he considered the indigenous and humanistic religion as Buddhism as the ideal for dalits against the dominant brahminical Hinduism, after weighing down all other options. However, he appreciated the ends of both Marxism and Buddhism is same, only means differ.

Another important issue closely discussed with the concept of caste is gender. Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, societies and cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviors of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). These roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. The concept of gender is vital because it facilitates gender analysis revealing as to how women’s subordination is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.

Gandhi’s emphasis was centered on women’s effort for their emancipation. He decried men’s attitude of considering women “as a property”. Gandhi advocated that self- activity of women is of greater significance and insisted for equality between men and women. He focused on feminine qualities as having the strength and moral courage. His ideal is an emphasis on women’s superior capacity for suffering rather than forceful intervention to protect their interest. Gandhi also insisted on the absolute personal dignity and autonomy of
women in the family and society. He does not accept all that is given in the scriptures as the word of God. Instead, Gandhi suggested that “an authoritative body should discard such texts as have no moral value or are against the fundamentals of religion”.  

Gandhi evolves a deep sentiment towards the position of women in the Indian society and claims a strong view of women’s dignified status in the society. Gandhi seems to believe upon the values which women bring to human interaction are necessary to the proper functioning and advancement of modern society, and that qualities that have formerly been associated with the feminine sides of our natures—such as compassion, nurturing, cooperation and empathy—will be increasingly important in creating a peaceful, just, and sustainable world civilization.

Gandhi no doubt strongly condemns the patriarchal structure, which control and limit the space of women but his views on women autonomy is a matter of debate and research. Strikingly enough, if we understand Gandhi’s ideas carefully, we find that Gandhi advocates the removal of patriarchal values and creation of a just society where women are treated as agent with dignity but he ceases to look at the more critical aspects of his thought where women are always looked at from the perspective of idealized mythological world views of characters such as Damayanti, Draupadi, and Sita etc. Therefore, many scholars find Gandhi’s ideas on these characters problematic and non-pragmatic.

Gandhi and his ideas on women’s liberation have been critiqued by liberals and post modernist thinkers where women are being treated with a difference in carving out her own space, agency, rights and personhood, not merely as puppet of the history where women are idealized in the images of Devi, Lakshmi and Durga. It is a different question as to how these critiques of Gandhi are justified, valid and logical. Gandhi’s ideas offer fresh insights to re-conceptualize women’s freedom and re-interpret Gandhi in the light of experiences of struggle which women folk have waged in the contemporary times. While Gandhi’s support for women’s equality was genuine, his vision on
female autonomy was limited. He was a product of a rigidly patriarchal society in which women had little or no education or independent identity.

Gandhi espoused greater political independence for women, but he saw a more limited social role for women. He supported education for women but favored a very narrow curriculum. His notion of female education was confined to home economics and family health. At an educational conference in Gujarat in 1917, he declared, "As Nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equal in life, but their functions differ. It is woman’s right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, woman saves and spends. Woman looks after the feeding of the child. She shapes its future. She is her children’s educator, and hence, mother to the nation...If this is the scheme of Nature, and it is just as it should be, woman should not have to earn her living. A state of affairs in which women have to work as telegraph clerks, typists or compositors can be, I think, no good, such a people must be bankrupt and living on their capital".3

Gandhi’s beliefs on gender were only one of its kind and exceptional, sometimes- contradictory, so to say, blend of modernity and tradition. On the one hand, he talks vigorously for women’s legal and political rights. On the other, he delimits their function in a peculiar way too. Gandhi did more to advance women’s freedom in India. He prompted equality for women as one of the essential pillars of his agenda for India’s advancement. Gandhi wrote: “I have ever believed, that the salvation of India lies in the elevation of her women".4 Thus, Gandhi supported and broadened the campaign for women’s rights, extending to all classes and communities and linking it to the demands for independence. Freeing women from the bondage of traditionally prescribed roles was essential to his vision of social change.

Gandhi’s attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of compassion and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. The contradiction between his liberal feminist pronouncements, his
egalitarian, loving and respectful concern for women, his belief in their role in politics and in society is sometimes difficult to reconcile. Yet Gandhi, more than anyone else, struggled with these paradoxes in the existing social milieu. Comparing his vision of women with the current status of women and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment will provide a measure of what has been achieved.

After having discussed the issues of caste and gender from a Gandhian perspective, the third chapter of our thesis was purported to analyze and explore the notion of modernity as understood by Gandhi. What we set out to do in this chapter may be put in the following way: first, modernity and its trajectory in relation to historical and cultural matrix. Second, Gandhian critique of rationalized Western modernity as an alternative modernity, so to say, modernity as a way of life and third, its consequences for varied humanitarian world views, where diverse cultures, civilizations and ethnicities might negotiate with one another by having a belief in diversity, concrete human values and values of social, political and cultural transformations.

There are no definitive explanations for the meaning of 'modernity'; different writers have different ideas about its meaning. Two of the most significant thinkers of the period were, in biology, Charles Darwin and, in political philosophy, Karl Marx. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection undermined the religious certainty of the general public, and the sense of human uniqueness of the intelligentsia. The notion that human beings were driven by the same impulses as lower animals proved to be difficult to reconcile with the idea of an ennobling spirituality. Karl Marx seemed to present a political version of the same proposition: that problems with the economic order were not transient; the results of specific wrong doers or temporary conditions, but were fundamentally contradictions within the "capitalist" system. Both thinkers would spawn defenders and schools of thought that would become decisive in establishing modernism.⁵
In western thought, the term ‘modernity’ was used to contrast the project of enlightenment from the received religious and cultural views. To become modern was seen as accepting a new sensibility of critical reasoning on empirical sciences and against the medieval religious world-view based on the authority of revelation and complete faith in the sacred scriptures. Modern world or society is different in significant respect from the pre-modern or non-modern forms of society in terms of the aspirations, sensibility and vision, which have guided human conduct at the individual and collective level. The modern sensibility assumed the possibility of an endless growth of knowledge which would enable human beings to know, control and transform nature society and other facets of human condition in pursuit of their well being and perfection. While cognitive activity was regarded as the human endeavor to represent, model and mirror reality in universal terms, each new development in history was characterized as an improvement or progress over the past.

New discoveries in various scientific disciplines and their technological applications played a significant role in the widespread acceptance of the project of modernity. As it can be noticed, everything did not go well with the project though it did bring about significant transformations in comparison to the living conditions and outlooks of the pre-modern or non-modern societies in many ways.

Gandhi’s critique of western modernity becomes a thesis for further analysis. Gandhi’s text questions some of the practices and ideals that we take for granted and particularly his views on modernity. Gandhi calls on the core of tradition as resourceful in formation of an ideal society. Gandhi confronts the foundational principles of the modern world which he sees providing complexity, materialism and poverty. He offers an idealized conception of traditional life in rural India. He sees modernity as addressing a person’s interests or wealth (artha) and desire (kama) but ignoring questions about a person’s responsibilities in the wider world (dharma).6
In Gandhi’s view, modernity displaces other modes of thinking and moral points of references, such as those found in religion, tradition, and the folkways of rural societies. One problem Gandhi finds with modernity is that its standards are internal and if it meets the standards it has set for itself, it declares itself a success. Gandhi vehemently rejects such an idea on modernity. Goals and practices must be judged by more rigorous standards than provided by ‘artha’ and ‘kama’ or production and consumption. For Gandhi, a person’s own tradition as mediated by a person’s conscience provides men and women with grounded, external standards to judge.

Gandhi endorsed many key aspects of this understanding of modernity, such as the doctrine of human rights, the basic equality of all humans, the right of all to democratic representation, the principal 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.

If we carefully look into these issues, we see that Gandhi was taking up a strategic position within the debates of his day. His relationship to modernity was dialogic rather than antagonistic. What is taken as Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj 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 system of democracy and so on. Against this, he counterpoised his own definition of what entailed a genuine ‘civilization’ that had, to be rooted in an alternative morality and alternative worldview. For Gandhi, every civilization was inspired and energized by a specific conception of human beings. If that conception was mistaken, it corrupted the entire civilization and made it a force for evil. According to him, that was the case with modern civilization. Although it had many achievements to its credit, it was fundamentally flawed, as was evident in the fact that it was aggressive, imperialist, violent,
exploitative, brutal, unhappy, restless, and devoid of a sense of direction and purpose.\(^7\) In Gandhi’s view, the modern civilization has “grown as terrible as a wolf through its hunger for wealth and its greedy pursuit of worldly pleasure.”\(^8\) Elsewhere he equates it with the *Upas* tree,\(^9\) which is rooted in, thrives on, and irradiates immortality because of its preference for, and active propagation of, the cult of bodily welfare as the prime object of life.\(^9\)

Gandhi was an ardent critic of modern civilization. He attacked the very notion of modernity and progress and challenged the central claim that modern civilization was a leveler in which the productive capacities of human labor rose exponentially, creating increased wealth and prosperity for all and hence increased leisure, comfort, health and happiness. Far from attaining these objectives, modern civilization, Gandhi argued, contributed to unbridled competition among human beings and thereby the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering. It is precisely because modern civilization ‘looks a man as a limitless consumer and thus sets out to open the floodgates of industrial production that it also become the source of inequality, oppression and violence on a scale hitherto unknown to human history’.\(^10\)

According to Gandhi’s, modernity displaces other modes of thinking and moral points of reference, such as those found in religion, tradition, and the folkways of rural societies. For him, these alternative modes of knowledge are not merely one option among many ways of knowing; he sees them addressing persistent moral issues about the nature of human beings in ways he thinks modernity cannot. This is so, Gandhi believes, because modernity has only partial ways of organizing and guiding practice. Moreover, he holds that modernity, fixed on present performance, is unwilling to learn from the past and unconcerned about the fate of the real human beings in the future. Gandhi, thus, finds that modernity does not have the resources to correct its own defects.

Gandhi’s analysis of modernity comes from a person who is part of an ancient, practiced tradition as well as of a colony where alien principles and practices are presented as superior to indigenous ones. In attacking British
colonialism, Gandhi insists that political independence is an essential but only partial requirement for an India where everyone is autonomous. What is needed, according to Gandhi, is to challenge modernity with its emphasis on materialism and its destruction of community and tradition.

Gandhi’s views on caste and gender are found to be significant in understanding the emergence of modernity in the Indian context. There is a deep-seated relation among the concepts of caste, gender, and modernity. One can have a better understanding on these issues when taken collectively. It seems that the questioning of caste and gender issues may be related to the emergence of modernity in the Indian context because Gandhi advocates a different notion of modernity in critiquing the western civilization.

Gandhi’s idea of modernity though rejects the western modernity of industrialization where he thinks that it would lead to the exploitation of the working class yet his idea of modernity seems to be restricted and partial. His conception of modernity seems to be a romanticized ideal that suggests the reform in the society through self-regeneration of the individuals living there. In practice, these ideals seem to contradict Gandhi’s vision of modernity as Gandhi nowhere gives space to the active participation of the downtrodden in their emancipation. Political freedom for Gandhi was a stepping-stone leading towards real Swaraj. (Self-rule) Swaraj is that condition in which people learn to rule themselves. In other words, the individual is the cornerstone of the edifice of his Swaraj. But the question is: who is regarded as an individual or person? Normally, in the Indian social and cultural conditions, persons are those who are born as Brahmin, kshatriya and Vaisya. That is to say, a sudra can never be recognized as a person. Hence, the issue of caste and gender are inseparably linked with the notion of person in the Indian context.

The preceding pages were attempted to explore and analyze Gandhi’s understanding on the concepts of caste, gender, and modernity. Three important sets of problems have emerged in this process of understanding and re-appropriating Gandhi’s views on caste, gender, and modernity. The first relates to
Gandhi’s understanding on caste. With regard to the Indian reality of caste, it may be stated that Gandhi simply reworked on the old rationalisms in incremental attempts to make them more inclusive in the hope that they might work after all. Being a radical Hindu, Gandhi has seldom questioned the denouncement of caste as an institution. On the other hand, Gandhi supported the Indian concept of caste with its traditionally ascribed social status based on birth, social and economic power and privileges and life chances and life styles. Gandhi’s ideal of varnadharma, combined a rationalization of the attributes of caste with the liberal tradition of the West. In Gandhi’s view, one is best suited to his hereditary occupation, which may not be considered as modern.

As a critique of modernity, Gandhi offers certain engaging reflections on western modernity, science, rationality and the process of industrialization as a sight of individualism, domination and commodification. Modernity as a problem is not an idea or a noble aim to which humanity may strive. On the contrary, it is a negative force that totally uproots the normative basis of what is known as the ‘traditional’ society.

Second, Gandhi offers an alternative outlook towards modernity through which religion, indigenous well in terms of ‘swadeshi’ and the principle of morality, drawing from Indian civilization and its ethos, tradition, culture and past heritage. However, this set of reflections seems quiet abstract and metaphysical in nature.

Third, the creative and engaging task of the present study has provided a newer understanding and perspective on the ambivalence of Gandhian expressions in the forms of tradition versus modernity, rights versus duty and such other set of problems where we find Gandhian political philosophy has been full of spaces to offer us ambivalence and possibility for newer and creative interpretations. Like a turning fork vibrating between two powerful forces, the one human and the other divine, Gandhi gives new voice to the deep meaning for the human spirit as emancipative and communicative.
Notes and References


