

Was Gandhi Anti-science- Jawhar Sircar

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M K Gandhi looking into a microscope

Aldous Huxley was among the first to brand Gandhi and his movements 'anti-science'. "Tolstoyan's and Gandhiites tell us to 'return to nature'," he said, "in other words, abandon science altogether and live like primitives". This impression was surely in currency and, in the absence of a determined, evidence laden rebuttal, it continues to prevail. Dr Meghnad Saha once told the Russians that he and his fellow scientists had "as little regard" for Gandhi's economic and social theories "as you 'the Russians' have for Tolstoy".

This alleged anti-scientific approach of Gandhi contrasts sharply with the worldview of his devoted follower and hand-picked Prime Minister of Free India. Jawaharlal Nehru made a clear divide between himself as a science person and Gandhi as a religious man. It is this stereotype that also bolstered the idea that Gandhi was too deeply religious to be following the harsh objectivity and rationality that science demands. Nehru's Scientific Policy Resolution of 1956 is a landmark in Indian history, but let us probe a bit more before arriving at a final opinion on Gandhi.

It is true that Gandhi had written as early as in 1909 in his *Hind Swaraj* that "machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin." Again, he wrote in *Indian Opinion* in 1909 that "the boast about the wonderful discoveries and the marvelous inventions of science, good as they undoubtedly are in themselves, is, after all, an empty boast. They offer nothing substantial to struggling humanity." But while these and similar statements that he made in South Africa, long before he returned to India in 1914 were indeed strong, they cannot be used to condemn Gandhi for life, without appreciating the context in which he wrote them. A more balanced study will reveal that he was not altogether against science. On the contrary, he was a classical empiricist who

subjected himself to the quintessential scientific method of continuous self-corrections based on acquired evidence.



Gandhi and scientist Acharya P C Ray

Gandhi did not condemn the scientific temper of the West, but he objected to the use of scientific discoveries against humanity. In fact, as history proves, most scientific and technological advances were made during war with the objective of destroying the countries and people on the other side— with little qualms about them being an inextricable part of one common humanity. The exploitative nature of industrialisation and colonialism made him shudder and he cried aloud in sheer horror: “Machines are merely tools and Not our Masters!”

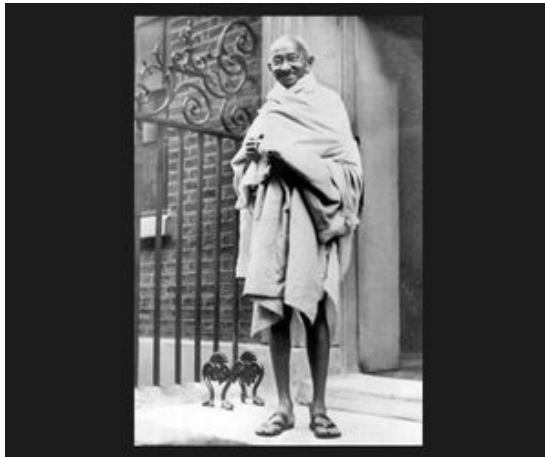
He was at peace with those machines that served to enhance human productivity through sharing of labour and viewed the sewing machine with extreme fondness. He declared it to be “one of the few useful things ever invented”. But he was fiercely opposed to those machines that made the humans redundant or extremely lazy, bogged in mindless tasks.

Soon after his return to India, he visited Calcutta (now Kolkata) to attend the opening of JC Bose’s Research Institute, which he said “was a spiritual affair rather than a public show.” He was on the best of terms with scientists like Acharya JC Bose who met MKG in Mumbai in 1924. He even commended the latter and said that “Thanks to the marvellous researches of ... Bose...his discoveries are revolutionising the accepted...” Gandhi’s opinion was, however, on the areas of interest of scientists rather than on Science itself. “Scientists misplace priorities”, he said, “which ignored the needs of the suffering millions in the country.” Speaking in Delhi in 1921, he praised the spirit of research that fires the modern scientists. He went on to say that “my quarrel is not against that spirit. My complaint is against the direction that spirit has taken ... for merely material advances.” He lived to see the unspeakable devastation that nuclear scientists wreaked upon the innocent citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

“There is an orderliness in the Universe, there is an unalterable law governing every thing and every being that exists or lives. It is no blind law; for no blind law can govern the conduct of living beings.”

In 1922, Gandhi elaborated on the misplaced priorities of science by stating that “no disturbance had been created by machinery that could not be corrected. It was a mental state that had to be put right.” Gandhi’s insistence was that science and machinery could be accommodated in his world “provided they do our bidding”. He was more forthright in 1925, when addressing students and teachers in Trivandrum (now Thiruvananthapuram): “It is a common superstition in India, and more so outside India that I am an opponent, a foe, of science.” He took the issue headlong and declared that “Nothing can be farther from truth than a charge of this character. It is perfectly true, however, that I am not an admirer of science....but I think that we cannot live without science, if we keep it in its right place.”

Addressing the Indian Institute of Science in 1927, he pleaded “let the big corner in your heart remain perpetually warm for the benefit of the poor millions”. Two years later, Gandhi held a contest for the inventors, with a prize money of one lakh rupees — a lot of money those days — for designing a charkha machine that would convert raw cotton into yarn, so that the Indian handloom weaver could remain competitive with the textile mills of Britain.



Mahatma Gandhi in London

He never met Einstein, but had an exchange of letters where they deeply appreciated each other’s work. Einstein wrote to Gandhi in 1931, when he was in the UK, “your work shows to the world that goal can be achieved without violence... I hope to meet you in future..” Gandhi replied to him in Berlin. His relationships with other great scientists are equally revealing. He held Acharya P C Ray, both as a chemist and as a Swadeshi entrepreneur, as a role model for aligning science with the progress of the society. In effect, Gandhi wanted science to take cognisance of the pressing concerns of humanity. In 1936, we came across a long discussion between Dr C V Raman and Gandhiji. He roped in important scientists such as J C Bose, C V Raman, P C Ray as Members of the Khadi Development Board.

He rued Ayurveda’s lost glory and felt that it could only be recovered if the *vaids* acquired honesty of purpose and pursued the research spirit of the west. He meant science and this statement evoked criticism from prominent persons like Kaviraj Gananath Sen, a senior practitioner of Ayurveda in Calcutta. Gandhi insisted that many Ayurvedic practitioners were mere quacks pretending to know much more than they actually did. He felt they should be

studying the Ayurvedic system in the light of modern developments, subject themselves to peer reviews and not hide their knowledge from the world. “I know of not a single discovery or invention of any importance on the part of Ayurvedic physicians as against a brilliant array of discoveries and inventions which western physicians and surgeons boast.”

Throughout his life, he refused to accept dogma of any kind. The opening note to the reader of *Hind Swaraj* was “I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth.” He continued, “My life consists of nothing else but numerous experiments with truth...”. He went on to state that “I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality on conclusions, but keeps an open mind.”

Mahatma Gandhi was overwhelmed by the cosmos. He felt that “There is an orderliness in the Universe, there is an unalterable law governing every thing and every being that exists or lives. It is no blind law; for no blind law can govern the conduct of living beings.” Yet, the rationalist in Gandhi comes out when he severely criticises astrology as nonsense. These episodes and statements reveal that it was rationality that guided his life and his despair was at the depredations on human life and society that a section of science was wreaking, not at science itself.



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