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GANDHI ON MACHINERY (1919–47)

No other question treated in *Hind Swaraj*, not even that of the lawyers, doctors and hospitals, has provoked as much controversy as has the question of machinery – in the current idiom, ‘technology’. Gandhi’s thinking on machinery underwent gradual development, the main features of which are traced below. [Ed.]

1919

‘There is thus room in the country for both the mill industry and the handloom weaving. So let mills increase as also spinning-wheels and handlooms. And I should think that these latter are no doubt machines. The handloom is a miniature weaving mill. The spinning-wheel is a miniature spinning-mill. I would wish to see such beautiful little mills in every home. But the country is fully in need of the hand-spinning and hand-weaving industry. Agriculturists in no country can live without some industry to supplement agriculture ... Even if we have sufficient mills in the country to produce cloth enough for the whole country, we are bound to provide our peasantry, daily being more and more impoverished, with some supplementary industry, and that which can be suitable to crores of people is hand-spinning and hand-weaving. Opposition to mills or machinery is not the point. What suits our country is the point. I am not opposed to the movement of manufacturing machines in the country, nor to making improvements in machinery. I am only concerned with what these machines are meant for. I may ask, in the words of Ruskin, whether these machines will be such as would blow off a million

men in a minute or they will be such as would turn waste lands into arable and fertile land. And if legislation were in my hands, I would penalise the manufacture of [labour-saving] machines and protect the industry which manufactures nice ploughs which can be handled by every man.'

(CW 16: 134-5)

1922

'India does not need to be industrialised in the modern sense of the term. It has 750,000 villages scattered over a vast area ... The people are rooted to the soil, and the vast majority are living a hand-to-mouth life ... pauperism is growing. There is no doubt also that the millions are living in enforced idleness for at least four months in the year. Agriculture does not need revolutionary changes. The Indian peasant requires a supplementary industry. The most natural is the introduction of the spinning-wheel, not the handloom. The latter cannot be introduced in every home, whereas the former can, and it used to be so even a century ago. It was driven out not by economic pressure, but by force deliberately used as can be proved from authentic records. The restoration, therefore, of the spinning-wheel solves the economic problem of India at a stroke ... I hope you will not allow yourself to be prejudiced by anything you might have heard about my strange views about machinery. I have nothing to say against the development of any other industry in India by means of machinery, but I do say that to supply India with cloth manufactured either outside or inside through gigantic mills is an economic blunder of the first magnitude, just as it would be to supply cheap bread through huge bakeries established in the chief centres in India and to destroy the family stove.'

(CW 22: 401-2)

1924

'What I object to, is the *craze* for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on "saving labour" till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets

to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of the few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might.

... scientific truths and discoveries should first of all cease to be the mere instruments of greed. Then labourers will not be over-worked and machinery instead of becoming a hindrance will be a help. I am aiming, not at eradication of all machinery, but limitations ...

The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man. For instance, I would make intelligent exceptions. Take the case of the Singer Sewing Machine. It is one of the few useful things ever invented, and there is a romance about the device itself. Singer saw his wife labouring over the tedious process of sewing and seaming with her own hands, and simply out of his love for her he devised the sewing machine, in order to save her from unnecessary labour ...

It is an alteration in the condition of labour that I want. This mad rush for wealth must cease, and the labourer must be assured, not only of a living wage, but a daily task that is not a mere drudgery. The machine will, under these conditions, be as much a help to the man working it as to the State, or the man who owns it. The present mad rush will cease, and the labourer will work ... under attractive and ideal conditions ... Therefore, replace greed by love and everything will come right.'

(*CW* 25: 251-2)

1931

'I hold that the machinery method is harmful when the same thing can be done easily by millions of hands not otherwise occupied ... Western observers hastily argue from Western conditions that what may be true of them must be true of India where conditions are different in so many material respects. Applications of the laws of economics vary with varying conditions.

The machinery method is no doubt easy. But it is not necessarily a blessing on that account ... If the craze for the machinery method continues, it is highly likely that a time will come when we shall be so incapacitated and weak that we shall begin to curse ourselves for having forgotten the use of the living machines given to us by God.'

(CW 47: 89–90)

'Machinery is a grand yet awful invention. It is possible to visualise a stage at which the machines invented by man may finally engulf civilisation. If man controls the machines, then they will not; but should man lose his control over the machines and allow them to control him, then they will certainly engulf civilisation and everything.'

(CW 48: 353)

1934

'When as a nation we adopt the spinning-wheel, we not only solve the question of unemployment but we declare that we have no intention of exploiting any nation, and we also end exploitation of the poor by the rich ... When I say I want independence for the millions, I mean to say not only that the millions may have something to eat and to cover themselves with, but that they will be free from the exploitation of people here and outside. We can never industrialise India, unless, of course, we reduce our population from 350 millions to 35 millions or hit upon markets wider than our own and dependent on us. It is time we realised that, where there is unlimited human power, complicated machinery on a large scale has no place ... We cannot industrialise ourselves, unless we make up our mind to enslave humanity.'

(CW 58: 400)

1935

'Machinery well used has to help and ease human effort. The present use of machinery tends more and more to concentrate wealth in the hands

of a few in total disregard of millions of men and women whose bread is snatched by it out of their mouths.’

(CW 61: 416)

1936

[Responding to a Japanese correspondent who asked whether Gandhi was against this machine age]:

‘To say that is to caricature my views. I am not against machinery as such, but I am totally opposed to it when it masters us ...

Q. “You would not industrialise India?”

A. “I would indeed, in my sense of the term. The village communities should be revived. Indian villages produced and supplied to the Indian towns and cities all their wants. India became impoverished when our cities became foreign markets and began to drain the villages dry by dumping cheap and shoddy goods from foreign lands.”

(CW 64: 118)

1940

‘We should not use machinery for producing things which we can produce without its aid and have got the capacity to do so. As machinery makes you its slave, we want to be independent and self-supporting; so we should not take the help of machinery when we can do without it. We want to make our villages free and self-sufficient and through them achieve our goal – liberty – and also protect it. I have no interest in the machine nor [do] I oppose it. If I can produce my things myself, I become my master and so need no machinery.’

(CW 71: 383)

1945

Here Gandhi makes the connection between machinery and violence. [Ed.]

‘Another danger in making more and more use of machinery is that we have to make great efforts for the protection of it, that is to say, we shall have to keep an army as is being done today elsewhere in the world. The fact is that even if there is no danger of aggression from outside we shall be slaves to those who will be in control of the big machinery. Take the case of the atom bomb. Those nations who have atom bombs are feared even by their friends. If we take a wise view, we shall be saved from the working of machinery.’

(*CW* 82: 132–3)

1946

Gandhi’s definition of a machine, as given in his address to the Indian Industries Ministers’ Conference, Poona. The text of the address is not available. The following is taken from a report on it published in *CW* 85: 95. [Ed.]

‘Ours has been described as the machine age, because the machine dominates our economy. Now, what is a machine? – one may ask. In a sense, man is the most wonderful machine in creation. It can be neither duplicated nor copied.

He [Gandhi] had, however, used the word not in its wider sense but in the sense of an appliance that tended to displace human or animal labour instead of supplementing it or merely increasing its efficiency. That was the first differentiating characteristic of the machine. The second characteristic was that there was no limit to its growth or evolution. That could not be said of human labour. There was no limit beyond which its capacity or mechanical efficiency could not go. Out of this circumstance arose the third characteristic of the machine. It seems to be possessed of a will or genius of its own. It was antagonistic to man’s labour. Thus it tended more to displace man, one machine doing the work of a hundred, if not a thousand, who went to swell the army of the unemployed and the under-employed, not because it was desirable but because that was its law.’

Gandhi was asked if he would oppose adoption of the flush system as one way of eradicating untouchability. He replied as follows. [Ed.]

'Where there is ample supply of water and [where] modern sanitation can be introduced without any hardship on the poor, I have no objection to it [the flush system]. In fact, it should be welcomed as a means of improving the health of the city concerned. At the moment, it can only be introduced in towns. My opposition to machinery is much misunderstood. I am not opposed to machinery as such. I am opposed to machinery which displaces labour and leaves it idle.'

(CW 85: 239-40)

1947

'Machine-power can make a valuable contribution towards economic progress. But a few capitalists have employed machine-power regardless of the interests of the common man and that is why our condition has deteriorated today.'

(CW 87: 249)