

Looking at ‘Modern Times’ through the Lens of Modernity

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Introduction:

Modernity has been a much talked about theme in our times. Individuals, groups, societies, nations often identify themselves as being modern. But what exactly is modernity? What does it mean to be modern? The term modernity has had different understandings over the period of time. If we look at the history of this term, the word “modern” has been taken from Ancient Latin and it was used to characterize a time period in history to distinguish it from other past eras. During the times of European Enlightenment and Renaissance period, modern was considered to be the thought, the value of man as the entity with free will, the ideas of progress, science, empiricism, secularism, individuality, the emphasis was on reason which gave way to the importance of science and its applications. In the west, modernity took the form of a civilization. In literature, science, society, politics; the nomenclature for the time period had also become modern literally with its various forms being in use such as modern, modernization, modernity, modernism. Then, in the nineteenth century, as Avijit Pathak (1998) states “modernity became identified with industrialism and the sweeping social, economic and cultural changes associated with it”. In the twentieth century, non-western societies also adopted modernity characterizing a secular state, an advanced form of the sexual division of labor, and a capitalist system.

The film ‘Modern Times’ released in 1936 is a classic on the growing idea of modernity during that period. As the title explicitly tells, is set in as well as talks about modernity. This film is a classic example to study both the promises and the discontents of modernity - the era and the phenomenon. In this paper, an attempt has been made to thematically locate and analyze the characteristics of modernity, its strengths, its crisis as well as criticism, and also the values of modernity in the film.

Modernity as inseparable from Science and Technology:

The modern world has sciences as the overarching phenomenon. It provides optimism and ambition of the possibility of creating a new world, improving over the old, be it through medicines for living longer, equipment and accessories to make life easier and comfortable or knowing the bounds of earth and expanse of the universe. This has become one of the ethos of modernity. The quest for progress, scientific development, and comfort guided the times. Technology claims to produce anything and everything. It gives the idea of largeness and bigness to the man, to society, and to the world. This largeness is evident in the factory scene. The machines are so huge that they can't even fit in the frame on screen. There is a sturdy man for the job of pulling the levers of the machines. This sturdy man also looks quite tiny when seen standing in front of these machines.

Modernity being contingent upon science offered a promising world. Liberating and universal nature of science got applied in every realm. It offered the promise of the individuality of human beings, promised material prosperity, gave rise to a capitalist order to promote this material prosperity, and led to the growth of a bureaucratic system of social organization to maintain the vast expansion. However, critical theorists argue that in essence, science does not liberate us, rather it tends to promote domination over man and nature. Avijit Pathak (1998) argues that technology itself is domination which leads

to an “administered society” having a culture that becomes an “industry” thereby depriving people of their criticality and producing models of blind emulation. This is precisely the theme of the movie to show that the importance given to production, profit and consumerism has taken over humanity. The examples for this are discussed in further sections in detail along with the precise issues that they put forward.

Rise of a capitalist structure- The 'Haves' and 'Have-Nots':

Modernity led to the emergence of a capitalist order in the society leading to a class division. According to Karl Marx, modern industrial society is divided into two classes on the basis of production - bourgeois and the proletariat. The proletariat or the workers constituted a large number and formed the base of the society as they are the ones engaged in production. The bourgeois were the minority, just a handful, consisting of the capitalists. These capitalists formed the superstructure of the society owning the means of production as well as the produce and the profit and surplus value from the product. Capitalists were called the 'haves' as they had all the luxury and controlled the power in the society. The proletariats on the other hand were called the 'have nots' since they worked hard for a minimum wage through which they could meet their basic needs only, and also, they did not hold any share in the profit from the produce.

The character of the tramp in the movie *Modern Times* is the representative of the proletariat. He is a poor man working in a factory. He does not even have lunch with him to eat. Other workers also have very little food to eat in contradiction to the food that the manager had. The dishes on the feeding machine, which was brought to test the feeding of the workers, were luxurious assuming that the workers can afford such delicacies. This shows that the people who make the machine, or who will, are very far from the reality of the workers.

On the other hand, the owner of the factory seemed to be a representative of the capitalist class. He wore a suit and was sitting in a fully furnished big room of his own. To convey any message, he communicated through a camera-like device and the person on the other side received the message via a screen. He is a typical profit mongering capitalist who does not care

about the humanistic aspects of the workers. These workers are also like a machine to him. It can be illustrated through a few examples. When the Tramp goes to the lavatory, he punches his card. There is a big rack in which every worker's cards are kept. This shows that every worker's time to enter the lavatory and coming out is noted. When the Tramp tries to smoke and take some more rest in the lavatory, a screen pops up with the owner shouting at the tramp and asking him to join the work immediately. He also allows the testing of a machine that is meant to feed the workers without stopping their work. The idea behind the manufacturing and acceptance of such a machine is nothing but to maximize profits. Another hour of work will surely increase the profits of the capitalist but there is no hint or indication throughout the movie of a rise in the wages of the labourers.

Seeing a married couple in a house, the tramp and Gamin also dream and aspire of having a house of their own. The couple's house was a big sturdy one made of cement, with an elaborate garden outside. It was considered to be a “real house”. But the house that the tramp and Gamin actually lived in shows the grim reality of a large number of poor workers. Theirs was a wooden house with its many parts broken, the furniture is also broken that can't be used to sit on, there is not even proper space for them to sleep in. And instead of a garden outside, there was a stream, probably of sewage is seen. The house was so small that only one person could sleep in the house and the other had to sleep in the adjoining small barn of hens.

Exploitation as a consequence of modernity:

Modernity and scientific development led to a fair share of exploitation as well. As Marx also claimed, the riches and boons of industrialization were concentrated in the hands of just a few, i.e. the capitalists. The larger population was exploited for its labour with no sharing in the profits. The examples given above also give a glimpse of their exploitation. But there are many other examples in the film that highlight the grim condition of the working class. The movie has been set in the times of the great depression when many factories were closed. But the brunt had to be borne by the poor worker. Large masses of unemployed people are shown rallying in the streets. Gamin's father shoots himself after a long struggle for a job, leaving behind his three children. The eldest one, Gamin used to steal

whatever food she could, to feed her sisters. When the factories reopened, men were seen hurdling outside the gates to get a chance to work. Getting the job was on a first come first serve basis, without any knowledge of the work. This appears to be criticized when the tramp, who gets the job as he could make it to enter the factory, is not able to perform his work properly. He is shown as having no skills for this work he is to perform and his actions even get the mechanic even in a life-threatening situation wherein the latter is engulfed in the machine.

Ironically, no rich capitalist has been shown to be suffering. The riches that they had accumulated probably helped them tide over the situation without being forced on to the streets. In fact, they are shown to be shopping for the luxuries in the departmental store, where the tramp worked as a night watchman.

Alienation caused by modernity:

As Avijit Pathak (1998) pointed out, modernity causes alienation. It tends to degrade human uniqueness, repressing non-rational human faculties, diminishing all differences thereby leading to homogenization. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1884, Karl Marx described and analyzed the alienation of industrial workers. He viewed labour as being objectified where the labour's work and the products they made belonged to someone else (Ozmon, 2012). This concept of alienation can be easily spotted in the movie. There was an alienation of the worker from the product he made. In the initial scenes of the movie, one can see workers assembling have their own tasks of working on different parts of some unknown final product like hammering or as Charlie Chaplin was seen tightening the bolts. Workers don't own the product nor can they control how it's made., What they produce is alien to them. The final product is never shown in the movie. There is no creative satisfaction and no sense of power. And since, the workers had no control over the production process, they themselves were reduced to commodities, selling their labour to those who owned the means of production. In the movie, the pace at which the work was to be done was controlled by a manager, and the workers were required to keep up. Hence, it can be inferred that there was an alienation of the worker from the process of production too. In all these scenes, it seemed like workers were human machines and were

working mindlessly and repetitively, there was no natural thought or creativity or self-expression involved. So much so, that there was no test for their skills as if they were not required to have any specific skill for the work. After the factory reopens, workers rush to get the job and whosoever was able to enter the gates became a worker in the factory.

There was surveillance even in the toilets so that the workers don't get time to sit and think, so thereby indicating there was an alienation of the worker with his own self also. It was also observed that there was no collaboration or interaction among workers. Even their lunch hour, which could be a social time for workers in such a dehumanized environment, was attempted to be replaced by a feeding machine, so that no time is lost without working. Here, alienation of the workers with fellow workers could be observed. The worker himself acts like a machine.

Later in the movie when the tramp works as an assistant to the mechanic, the mechanic is virtually engulfed in the machine when the lunch hour begins. The tramp stops all attempts to save him as it is the lunch hour. It also shows how the clock and material production overpowers personal relations and humanity. Though shown in a comic manner, priority is given to having lunch by both the tramp and the caught-up mechanic over saving the life as the delay in overcoming a life-threatening situation will not be compensated with a few extra minutes to eat.

Individualism and a sense of homelessness:

Along with alienation, modernity also invokes individualism and a sense of hopelessness. Auguste Comte criticized modernity for its resulting individualism. There is a disassociation of the individual from living as groups and communities. Berger talked about how modernity tends to disconnect people from the world. He comments that modernity surely tends to liberate man from the controls of family, tribes, clans, etc. and the individuals become more mobile and migratory, but they get uprooted from their own social milieu because of the existence of 'pluralistic structures of modern society'. This has been characterized as homelessness. Durkheim had also observed the phenomenon of anomie or normlessness in industrial societies.

It is quite evident in the movie as well. The only relational group that ever appears is the family of the gamin, which soon gets destroyed by the suicide of the father and two younger girls taken to the foster care. Everyone is so engrossed in the economic activities that no trace of family or any other relational group appears. In the factory also there are co-workers but no relationship is shown between them. Everyone is having their own lunch sitting alone in their spots. When the tramp does not have any food to eat, we do not find anyone offering or sharing food with him. Individualism has grown to the extent of loneliness. Such two lonely people, the tramp and the gamin try to form a bond and get into a relationship. Even when the Gamin's father shoots himself, we do not see any neighbour, or relative or a friend present to provide even moral support to the orphan girls.

Social systems: A product of modernity:

Another product of modernity was large social systems of management and administration: the bureaucracy. In the movie, the elaborate bureaucratic system was nowhere in sight to manage or help the unemployed and hungry people. The inefficiency of the bureaucratic system and people's mistrust in those becomes quite evident when Gamin flees from the officers who were to take her and her siblings to a foster home after their father's death. She is willing to live on the streets in the face of hunger and death rather than going to the designated government system for her care and well-being.

When the tramp also cannot find a job to support himself, he tries many times to rather end up in jail where he can at least have a roof and two square meals to eat. After losing their jobs, the tramp's coworkers are forced to commit a robbery in the departmental store where the tramp started working as a night watchman. They did not steal anything other than food and drink. This shows their destitution to the extent of the need to steal to fill their stomachs. In complete contrast is the multi-storied departmental store, in which they came to steal, with all the riches of the world, but alas, only for those few who hold the surplus to afford these.

There seems to be no arrangement for the education of the masses. The tramp is not skilled in any kind of work. As a result, he cannot stay in any job. Poor man tries hard his luck every day to get some work. But he holds no education

or skill or training for any kind of work. Modernity is claimed to be the epitome of enlightenment, knowledge, and innovations. But all these got reduced to be the prerogatives of the few who could afford these. The irony of modernity seems to be that all its liberating aspects themselves got confined and became mere commodities.

Modernity as a system of values: How unmodern "Modern Times" are!:

According to an eminent Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta (2000), modernity is not about consumption and technology, but modernity needs to be looked at as social relations. He says that modern society is one in which at least the following characteristics must be present:

- Dignity of the individual
- Adherence to universalistic norms
- Elevation of individual achievement over privileges or dis-privileges of birth
- Accountability in public life

The underlying principle of these values is what Dipankar Gupta call 'intersubjectivity'.

Dignity of the individual:

One of the most important values of modernity is equality. It can be achieved through intersubjectivity wherein a person feels easily replaceable by another person. When one realizes that the different fate of another person is because of his/her accident of birth, and it could be very well his/her own fate too, they feel empathetic towards the other person. This ethos erases the hierarchy and discrimination, and values the individual and the dignity of the individual. This will in turn not lead to the accumulation of benefits and profits in the hands of a few but an equal distribution of resources and the luxuries among all. But sadly, this ethos seems to be missing in the society depicted in the film *Modern Times*. There is a clear juxtaposition between the situation of the capitalist factory owner and the workers. In the machine world, empathy is also lost. In the scene of the trial of the feeding machine, its distributors are not able to control the machine and it hits and hurts the tramp continuously. Poor man is tied to it and cannot save himself. The distributors and the owner of the factory are not at all concerned about his condition. They continued to fiddle with the machine, with the

poor man tied to it, only aggravating its attacks. They all were just worried about the impending loss of profits if the machine does not work properly.

In another scene, the poor and hungry Gamin steals a loaf of bread from a bakery. A passerby, who had seen her stealing, informed the bakery and got her arrested. Even when the tramp took the charge upon him, as he wanted to go back to jail, she was still adamant about getting the real thief punished. Though she abided by the law and stuck to the truth, yet there was another rather grim truth that she nor anyone else present there - the baker, the policeman, other passersby, were concerned about. It was that the girl was poor and hungry and had no other option than to steal to fill her belly. None of them even bothered to ask the reason why she was stealing, forget about offering her something to eat. Everyone seems to be safe in his/her cocoon. They do not consider that it could be any one of them in her place and how they would have felt or done in the dearth of food. They were not at all concerned that there was a section out there in their very own society which did not even have access to basic amenities to lead life.

Adherence to universalistic norms:

Universality is the characteristic of modernity that marks it different from other times. The bedrock of this universality are the values of justice, equality, and fraternity. As discussed above intersubjectivity breeds equality but we find it largely missing in the society of Modern Times. Justice is nowhere inside as well. With the accumulation of virtually all the resources, luxuries, and power in the hands of few, the rest of the population is merely left to dance to their tunes. The situation is far from just. We see a couple residing in a house but the tramp and gamin live on the streets. Even when they find the house, it is not in the condition where one can live comfortably.

The departmental store scene clearly explicates the injustice prevalent in the society. On all the floors of the store, there are luxurious items that only the rich can afford. In the night the tramp and gamin slyly enter the store and enjoy all the riches. In the daylight by no means can they think of possessing any of the stuff. All of it is reserved only for the select few - those who have money. They were actually living off their dream in the night. Apart from these two, there entered

three more men in the store during the night to commit robbery. But they stole only food and drink and did not even touch any of the riches available. This scenario can never be of a just and equitable society.

However, the tramp, an uneducated, seemingly dimwitted man, incapable of doing anything, seems to uphold the basic values of modernity. He understands the pain of the hungry, unemployed men and allows them to eat and drink in the store to their hearts full. He was the one who brought Gamin inside, gave her good food and they both enjoyed the luxurious stuff probably for only once in their lives. He did all that at the cost of his job as a night watchman of the store. He is not selfish to think only about himself, his job, and next morning but feels that all the people like him are entitled to their belly full and enjoyment in life. He is the only one in the movie who is able to empathize with the condition of the other - be it thieves or Gamin.

Accountability in public life:

Modern society lays down an elaborate structure of public administration called bureaucracy. The principle behind it is the importance of public ethics over the private. This administrative structure is responsible for the well-being of everyone in the society. In the movie we get glimpses of this administration in different forms - the police and the Juvenile officers. The administration though appears to be fine but if we look closely it is not up to the mark. The unrest in the society in the face of unemployment is a strong example of the sloppy administration. When the unemployed youth is fighting and marching on the streets, the police immediately comes to disperse the masses. However, no other section of the social administration appears anywhere to listen to their grievances and help them out - precisely the role expected from any public administration system. Two officers are seen to take away the orphan girls after their father's death. But there appears to be no mechanism by the administration to pitch in the whole time so that the poor man had not committed suicide in the first place. He did not commit suicide for any personal reason. Rather his suicide was socially motivated. When he could not find any way howsoever to support his family, ultimately, he committed suicide. No part of the public administration structure was concerned with doing anything for the unemployed poor and

hungry public. Gamin had to resort to stealing to feed herself and her younger sisters. The officers appear only after the family is broken. Also, Gamin is not ready to go with them to foster care. It raises doubt why a young girl with no money and food is not ready to go to a government institution. Her decision to run away makes the audience wonder that probably the situation in foster care homes is really bad, so much so, that she chooses to live on the streets instead of going there.

We see police to be quite prompt in putting the culprits inside the jail in order to maintain the law and order situation in the society. But inside the prison the story is different altogether. The convicts are able to carry on with illegal activities even inside the prison. It is shown through a convict carrying drugs inside the prison canteen who is able to save his skin by putting the drug powder in a salt cellar. An officer, or a politician comes to inspect the prison. The prison officers present the tramp, jovial, and a nice man, in front of the inspector as a representative of all the prisoners, in an attempt to showcase a positive image of their institution. The inspector also is not able to spot any anomaly and leaves within some time. The whole process looks like a drill without any seriousness to it.

Elevation of individual over privileges and dis-privileges of birth:

As discussed in a previous section of social systems, it appears that education was not available for all. The tramp holds no skill or educational training to improve his condition by earning more. He and other workers are forced to hunt for work and continue to churn in the vicious cycle of failure, poverty, and nowhere there seems to be any window for the improvement of their lot. Their situation is quite in contrast to the value of individual achievement over any hierarchical constraints or privileges or dis-privileges of birth. There seems to be no scope for them to achieve anything for themselves. It is quite evident in the opening scene of the film where all the workers are likened to a herd of sheep, exactly the same - in their appearance, their situation, their struggle, and their fate. There is not even the acknowledgment of individuality in a capitalist society, lest individual achievement. The tramp looks for the same kind of work every day and every evening his situation is the same - failure.

His predicament is a comment on the closed lives of the larger section of the capitalist society, the proletariat. The suicide of Gamin's father symbolizes that the only way to break away from this predicament is death.

Nevertheless, the tramp and Gamin, true to the spirit of a striving modern individual, continues to struggle fiercely, and at the end of the movie embarks on a journey outside the city of exhausted possibilities, clinging on to a smile of hope, amidst all odds. The city symbolizes the capitalist social structure which has exhausted all chances of getting any opportunity for any improvement of their condition. This walking away can also be seen as symbolic of walking towards the alternate social structure of the socialist or communist society as presented by Marx.

The profit motive of capitalism reduces the human workers to a machine. As a result, the three values of modernity - equality, fraternity, and justice nowhere appear to be held in a capitalist society. For a society having these values as a bedrock, Marx calls for a revolution and a new social system to be set up where everyone participates in the production process, production is for the sustenance of a society, not an individual, all the producers have equal claim over the produce and the profit. There will be no surplus and hence no concentration in the hands of a few. Such a society will give importance to human beings and their relations over the machines.

The criticism that we find in Marx's writings and in the film *Modern Times* is not of modernity per se. Rather the criticism is of how modernity is inefficiently tackled, given wrong direction and breeding in the opposite directions from its ethos. Marx was not against scientific development or industrialization. The idea behind Marx's alternate society shifts the focus back on the importance of human beings, but in his social relations. This importance had become a privilege of a select few in the capitalist society. Equal distribution of resources is the practical application of the bedrock values of equality, fraternity, and justice. Everyone contributing to the process of production does away with hierarchies and privileges of birth. The creative satisfaction and a relation with the product breeds respect for the production process and in turn for the produce. As a result it will not be mindless consumption but the usefulness of

the produce. Optimum production will ensure the fulfilment of everyone's needs and will also foster a respectful relationship with nature. Modern man does have control over nature to a certain extent but that should not be taken for granted and lead to the exploitation of nature. Marx's idea of the social system also takes care of that. Hence Marx's idea was consistent with the ethos of modernity. Avijit Pathak calls socialism as "modernity's most rigorous champion", as a socialist society is "carefully designed, rationally managed and thoroughly industrialized."

It is not to claim that the practical application of Marxian ideas propelled modernity. Socialism also collapsed without achieving the modern ideals. Here, words of Dipankar Gupta give hope that modernity is not a state but a process.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Modernity as a concept has evolved over time. In this project, an effort has been to analyze the movie *Modern Times* through the lens of modernity. In recent times, it has been associated with the celebration of scientific and technological progress and industrialization. With Industrialization at the core, economic considerations became powerful over all others. The free market led to the monopolization of the new economic system of Capitalism. The

society, coming out of the hierarchical structure of aristocracy and feudalism, placed another hierarchical structure dividing the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' as Karl Marx puts it, into the superstructure and the base. The mass production for material comfort led to the alienation of the producer from the product. Emphasis on rationality and objectivity somewhere repressed the concerns of the 'non-rational' or emotional aspects of a person. The prowess of science to even control and manipulate the natural world also had a harmful impact on man's harmonious coexistence with nature and other species. Alienation was not just restricted to the product, but the vastness and largeness of modernity led to creeping of alienation to all other domains as well - with nature, social relations and administration, production, personal relations, etc.

On the other hand, some like Dipankar Gupta view modernity as a system of values. The goal of modernity is to attain universalistic values in social relations, even if one has not reached technological peaks. The four conditions namely, the dignity of an individual, universalistic values, accountability in public life, elevation from privileges, and lack of disprivileges of birth can only come into existence when economic structures allow for greater mobility and with an attitude for equality.

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