A Peer Reviewed Journal
Journal homepage:
https://anubodhan.org

Anubodhan, Vol. 2 No. 4, October-December 2026, Pages: 31-36
ISSN: 3049-4184 (Print) 3108-1185 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.65885/anubodhan.v2n4.2026.144

From Swaraj to Conviviality: Gandhi and Ivan Illich on Human Freedom

Dr. Sanchita Chakraborty [1]

Received: 30 October 2026 / Accepted: 10 November 2026 / Published online: 15 November 2026
Copyright © 2026 Author(s). Published by Siri Research Foundation. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

Abstract
The rapid growth of technology has changed the way people live and work. It has made many things easier, but it has also increased our dependence on machines, industries and consumer goods. This situation raises an important philosophical question: Does technological progress always lead to greater freedom and independence? The ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Ivan Illich offer an interesting way to explore this question. Although they lived in different times and came from different intellectual backgrounds, both questioned the impact of modern civilisation on human life. Gandhi, through his ideas of Swaraj, Swadeshi, simple living and self-restraint, emphasised moral freedom and individual responsibility. He believed that human well-being should not depend only on material comforts. In a similar way, Illich, through his concept of conviviality, criticised industrial systems and institutions that make people increasingly dependent on external services and technology. This paper examines the views of Gandhi and Illich, with special attention to their criticism of industrial society and the growing dependence on technology. It argues that their ideas offer a different way of looking at development, where individual freedom, self-reliance, moral values and community participation are given greater importance. The paper also discusses how their thoughts remain relevant today, particularly in the age of artificial intelligence, digital technology and growing consumerism.

Keywords: *Gandhi, Illich, Swaraj, Conviviality, Modern Civilisation, Freedom.*

Introduction

Modern civilisation is often linked with scientific discoveries, new technologies, industrial growth and economic development. Technology has certainly made many aspects of life easier. Communication has become faster, transport more convenient, and education and healthcare more accessible. However, these developments also raise an important concern. People are becoming increasingly dependent on machines, technology and large institutions. While these systems are meant to make life comfortable, they can sometimes limit personal freedom and weaken our ability to manage everyday activities independently. Many modern thinkers have questioned this relationship between technological progress

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Siliguri College, Siliguri, West Bengal, India
✉ Dr. Sanchita Chakraborty, E-mail: sanchitachakraborty64@gmail.com

and human freedom. Mahatma Gandhi and Ivan Illich are two important thinkers who shared this concern. Although they belonged to different periods and intellectual backgrounds, both challenged the belief that industrial growth and technological advancement always lead to a better society.

Gandhi's views on modern civilisation are clearly expressed in his book *Hind Swaraj* (1909). He criticised a way of life that encourages endless desires and makes people dependent on material comforts. For him, real progress was not simply about wealth, machines or physical facilities. It was more closely connected with moral growth, self-control and the ability to govern one's own life. Ivan Illich, an Austrian philosopher and social critic, also raised questions about the growing influence of industrial institutions. In his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), he explained how modern systems and technologies can gradually take control of human activities instead of helping people become more independent. He believed that when technology becomes too powerful and dominates everyday life, people lose the freedom to use their own skills and creativity. Thus, both Gandhi and Illich invite us to think about whether modern development truly serves human needs or makes people more dependent on the systems around them.

The philosophical connection between Gandhi and Illich becomes particularly significant when we examine their understanding of human autonomy. Gandhi's concept of Swaraj and Illich's concept of conviviality both emphasise the importance of individual freedom, self-reliance and the limitation of unnecessary institutional dependence.

The present study therefore attempts to examine how the philosophies of Gandhi and Illich can contribute to an alternative understanding of technological development. It also investigates whether their ideas can help us understand contemporary problems associated with artificial intelligence, digital platforms and the growing influence of technology over everyday human decisions. The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, analytical and comparative philosophical methodology.

Gandhi's Critique of Modern Civilisation and the Idea of Swaraj

Gandhi's criticism of modern civilisation should not be seen as a complete rejection of machines or scientific inventions. His main concern was the way modern society uses technology and the values that guide industrial growth. He believed that development should always serve human needs and should not become a source of exploitation or dependence.

In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi questions the common belief that modern civilisation is the highest form of human progress. He does not consider physical comfort, wealth or material achievements to be the true signs of a developed society. For him, real progress lies in the growth of moral values, self-control and the ability to lead a disciplined life. He believed that endless desires make people dependent on material things. The constant search for comfort often leads to competition, exploitation and social inequality. In such a situation, technology may not always bring freedom. Instead, it can become a means of controlling human life when it is not guided by moral values.

His idea of Swaraj is important for understanding this position. The term generally means self-rule, but Gandhi gives it a wider meaning. He believed that political freedom alone was not enough. A person could be politically free but still remain controlled by personal desires and habits. True freedom begins when individuals learn to control their thoughts, actions and behaviour.

Gandhi's idea of Swaraj can be understood in two ways:

Individual Swaraj: It refers to the ability of a person to control personal desires, make moral choices and take responsibility for their actions.
Collective Swaraj: It means that communities should have the freedom to manage their social, economic and political affairs without depending too much on centralised power.

His ideas of Swadeshi and village self-sufficiency also reflect this vision. Gandhi wanted local communities to become capable of meeting many of their own needs. He supported a decentralised economy in which people could take part in productive activities and maintain their independence. The spinning wheel, or Charkha, is a good example of this approach. For Gandhi, it was not just a simple tool for making cloth. It represented self-reliance, respect for labour and economic freedom. Through the Charkha, he wanted to encourage local production and reduce dependence on large industrial systems.

Thus, Gandhi's criticism of modern civilisation was not directed against every form of technology. Rather, he questioned the purpose behind its use. He wanted technology to improve human life without taking away individual freedom. His central concern was simple: human beings should remain the masters of their inventions, not become servants of the machines they create.

Ivan Illich's Critique of Industrial Society and the Idea of Conviviality

Ivan Illich also questioned the growing influence of industrial development on human life. He believed that many modern institutions gradually move away from their original purpose. Instead of helping people, they often make them more dependent and limit their freedom. In his book *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), Illich introduces the idea of convivial tools. He believes that tools should help people become more creative, independent and active members of society. They should make everyday activities easier without taking away individual abilities.

According to Illich, technology should remain under human control. Problems arise when people become so dependent on machines, experts and institutions that they lose the ability to act on their own. In such situations, tools no longer serve people. Rather, people begin to serve the systems they have created.

Illich makes a distinction between convivial tools and industrial tools. This difference is not simply about choosing traditional technology over modern inventions. His main concern is how technology affects human freedom. Convivial tools allow people to use their own skills, share knowledge and work together. On the other hand, large industrial systems often concentrate power, knowledge and resources in the hands of a few institutions. As a result, ordinary people may have less control over their own activities.

His criticism of institutional power is also evident in *Deschooling Society* (1971). Illich questions the idea that education must always depend on formal schools and established institutions. He argues that learning can take place in many ways, through personal experience, social interaction and the sharing of knowledge. He was concerned that the education system often makes people believe that learning is possible only through formal schooling.

In *Energy and Equity* (1974), Illich examines the relationship between transportation, energy use and social inequality. He explains that excessive dependence on modern transport systems does not always make people more mobile. Beyond a certain point, such systems can create new inequalities and restrict people's freedom of movement.

Illich's main concern was to protect the independence and creative abilities of ordinary people. He believed that institutions and technology should support human needs rather than control everyday life. His idea of conviviality therefore offers a different vision of

development. In this vision, people remain free to use their skills, make their own choices and participate actively in society. Technology should be a means of helping humanity, not a force that limits its freedom.

Gandhi and Illich in the Context of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Dependency

The ideas of Gandhi and Illich have become important in today's digital world. Artificial intelligence, social media and other digital platforms have changed the way people live and interact with one another. Technology has become a part of almost every aspect of daily life. It influences how we communicate, study, work and make decisions.

Artificial intelligence is one of the most significant developments in this field. It has made many tasks easier, especially in education, research, healthcare and communication. However, depending too much on these systems may affect our ability to think independently. People may gradually lose the habit of using their own judgement, creativity and reasoning skills.

Gandhi's idea of Swaraj can help us understand this problem. For him, freedom means more than being free from external control. It also involves the ability to think independently and take responsibility for one's actions. In the same way, people should not accept every suggestion made by artificial intelligence without questioning it. They must use their own understanding before making decisions.

For example, students who depend entirely on AI tools to prepare their assignments may gradually lose interest in reading, thinking and developing their own arguments. From a Gandhian point of view, this raises an important question about intellectual independence and personal responsibility. Technology may support learning, but it should not replace the student's own effort and judgement.

Illich's ideas provide another way of looking at this issue. His criticism of institutional control can also be applied to today's digital platforms. A large part of our access to information, communication and knowledge now depends on a few powerful technology companies. These platforms often influence what people read, watch and share. As a result, users may have less control over the information they receive and the way they use it.

This situation reflects Illich's concern about systems that gradually make people dependent rather than helping them become independent. His idea of conviviality reminds us that technology should encourage creativity, participation and freedom. It should give people more opportunities to use their abilities instead of making them passive users of digital services.

When only a few technology companies control important digital services, people often have little choice but to depend on them. These companies hold large amounts of data and have considerable influence over how information is shared and used. Such control raises serious concerns about individual freedom and people's role in a democratic society.

Illich's idea of conviviality offers a useful way to think about this problem. He believed that technology should help people develop their skills and creativity. It should encourage active participation rather than turn individuals into passive users. For instance, digital tools used in education should help students find information, exchange ideas and improve their knowledge. They should support the learning process instead of replacing independent thinking. Students must have the freedom to question, analyse and form their own opinions.

Gandhi's ideas of simple living and self-restraint are also relevant here. His philosophy encourages people to recognise their actual needs and avoid unnecessary desires. This approach can help us question our growing dependence on social media, online shopping

and digital entertainment. Spending too much time on these platforms may affect our personal relationships and create a constant desire for more.

The Gandhian idea of self-restraint and Illich's concept of conviviality together offer a meaningful way to rethink our relationship with technology. Both remind us that human beings should remain in control of their choices and activities.

The real issue, therefore, is not whether we should accept or reject artificial intelligence and digital technology. What matters is how we use them. Technological development should protect human dignity, encourage independent thinking and allow individuals to remain responsible for their own decisions. In this way, technology can become a useful part of human life without taking away our freedom.

Critical Evaluation: Similarities and Differences

Although Gandhi and Illich share several ideas, their philosophies are not exactly the same. They approached the problems of modern civilisation from different perspectives.

Gandhi's philosophy is mainly based on moral and spiritual values. He connects human freedom with truth, non-violence, self-discipline and personal responsibility. His criticism of modern civilisation comes from his concern about the declining moral values of society. Illich, however, focuses more on the role of modern institutions, industries and professional systems. Through his idea of conviviality, he explains how these structures can limit individual freedom and reduce people's ability to act independently.

Their views on technology also differ. Gandhi supports local production and labour-based activities because he believes they can create employment and strengthen village communities. Illich, on the other hand, examines how technological tools and large institutions affect human independence.

Despite these differences, their ideas complement each other. Gandhi provides a moral perspective on human freedom, while Illich helps us understand how modern systems can restrict it. Together, they offer a valuable way of thinking about development in which technology and industry remain useful to human beings rather than controlling their lives.

Conclusion

The ideas of Gandhi and Illich are relevant not only to their criticism of industrial civilisation. Their thoughts can also help us understand several issues of the present time, such as environmental protection, education, economic inequality and digital freedom.

In environmental ethics, Gandhi's belief in limiting one's needs offers an alternative to excessive consumption. He reminds us that people should not use natural resources simply to satisfy endless desires. Illich also questions industrial systems that consume large amounts of energy and put pressure on the environment. Both thinkers encourage us to rethink the meaning of development and its impact on nature.

Their views are also important in the field of education. Gandhi gave importance to learning through productive work, moral values and practical experience. Illich, on the other hand, questioned the growing dependence on formal educational institutions. Both believed that education should do more than prepare people for jobs. It should help them become independent, responsible and aware of their duties towards society.

Their ideas also have something to offer to discussions about digital freedom. Today, questions about data ownership, algorithmic control and the growing power of technology companies have become increasingly important. Gandhi and Illich encourage us to think about how technology can remain under people's control. Individuals should not remain

passive users of digital platforms. They should have a say in how these technologies are developed and used.

Thus, the ideas of Gandhi and Illich remain meaningful in addressing many challenges of modern society. Their thoughts encourage us to build a way of life that gives importance to ethical values, environmental responsibility and human freedom.

References

Babu, B. R. (2011). *Education & Ideology of Gandhi & Ivan Illich,* Neelkamal Publications(P) Ltd.

Gandhi, M. K. (1909). *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, M. K. (1958–1994). *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Publications Division, Government of India.

Gandhi, M. K. (1941). Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place. Navajivan Publishing House.

Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling Society*. Harper & Row.

Illich, I. (1973). *Tools for Conviviality*. Harper & Row.

Illich, I. (1974). *Energy and Equity*. Calder & Boyars.

Illich, I. (1977). Disabling professions. In I. Illich, I. K. Zola, J. McKnight, J. Caplan, & H. Shaiken, Disabling professions (pp. 11–39). Marion Boyars.

Parel, A. J. (1997). *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*. Cambridge University Press.

Schumacher, E. F. (1973). *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Blond & Briggs.