Title of Lesson: Modern Civilization vs. True Civilization

Lesson By: Karla Tobar
4th Grade Bilingual Teacher
PS 443X – The Family School, Bronx, NY

| Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 4th grade/Social Studies/Writing | Class Size: 25 | Time/ Duration of Lesson: 1 month |

Guiding Questions:
- What is Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?
- What does Gandhi consider to be a true civilization?
- How does colonialism in the United States, specifically New York, reflect Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization?

New York City Social Studies Content Standards:
- Reasons for European exploration of the western hemisphere (gold, alternate route to China, spices) 4.1c, 4.1f, 4.2c

Industrialization and New York:
- Emergence of New York as an economic power 4.1d, 4.2b, 4.2c

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson will explore the motives behind modern industrialization and modern civilization. Gandhi critiqued modern civilization’s emphasis on individualism and the accumulation of material objects because these sacrificed one’s social responsibility and duty to create and elevate the self and community. Students will use this information to make a connection between imperialism in India and colonization in what is now the United States.

Lesson Content:
Gandhi’s view of a cooperative, self-reliant civilization aimed at transforming and elevating the self and community challenged modern civilization’s consumption and materialistic fixation. A fixation rooted in greed and power advocating for the “survival of the fittest”. Gandhi viewed modern civilization as a corruptive system which increased bodily and individual happiness at the expense of spiritual and communal happiness (Gandhi, 2009, p. 34).

Modern civilization’s measure of progress as bodily comfort and the accumulation of wealth and objects degenerated the morality of humans; while individualism resulting from greed...
separated communities. Gandhi criticized the emphasis modern civilization placed on bodily comfort through the development of machinery, artillery, and modes of transportation (Gandhi, 2009, p. 35). Moreover, people’s desire to increase their ownership of materials and ease their amount of physical labor came at the expense of others.

The “civilized” populations hailed from “developed” Western European countries like England. The British had colonized India and established modern civilization as the only way to be civilized. As a result, all “others” were “supposed to have become civilized out of savagery” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 35). Indians had a simple lifestyle compared to the British who translated simplicity as uncivilized. Differences in clothing, nutrition, and hygiene triggered these attitudes. A concentration of wealth amongst an elite few allowed them to remain “civilized” and add to their luxuries. This notion rippled down to the masses who attempted to become civilized through consumption and accumulation. The rise in wants of objects to satisfy bodily comforts combined with industrialization allowed for mass production, “thousands of workmen [met] together…their [work] condition…[was] worse than that of beasts” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 35). Gandhi powerfully stated, “Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion, now they are enslaved by temptation of money and…luxuries…” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 35). Modern civilization contaminated the notion of physical labor - metaphorically replacing places for spiritual freedom and self-improvement with factories (Gandhi, 2009, p. 36 & Sethia, personal communication, July, 27, 2011). Industrialization and the use of machinery meant people could produce a large quantity of materials in a shorter amount of time and for less money. This allowed more people to buy material goods at a lower price. Gandhi equated people to voluntary slaves because they were both working in poor conditions and were working and fixated with the accumulation of possessions. According to Gandhi, this body-soul split plagued humanity.

An emphasis on accumulation led to a social divide where individualism and greed violated nature and fellow humans. According to Gandhi, the acquisition of goods did not lead to happiness, “a man is not necessarily happy because he is rich or unhappy because he is poor” (Gandhi, 2009, p. 66). Reaching happiness in a modern civilization was measured by the amount of material possessions a person has. People who have more money would want to share their wealth and humility, simplicity, and self-control would be the richness people will want to achieve. For Gandhi, a true civilization should be “aimed at the wellbeing of all” and “measured through the moral and spiritual advancement of its people” (Sethia, 2012, pgs. 84 & 85). In contrast to modern civilization, Gandhi believed in the restorative transformation of the labor force through production by the masses (Sethia, 2012, pg. 85). Gandhi’s use of the charkha (spinning wheel) demonstrated an alternative form of production, where individuals became responsible for a trade that promoted self sufficiency. Happiness in a true civilization would be measured by taking the time to meditate and develop the self, becoming self-sustaining, engaging in meaningful labor, and building community. In a true civilization, people would develop and exercise their sense of social responsibility in self-sustaining communities. At the heart of true civilization lies moral regeneration, transforming the nature of violence and restoring the humanity of individuals.

The United States and India share a history of British colonization. Prior to the American Independence, the British colonizers arrived in the Northeast coast of what is now the United
States and displaced the native people of the land. Native Americans had a structured and organized village life, but their homes, clothing, and tools, led the British to label them as uncivilized savages. The British quickly identified Native Americans as the “others”. This dehumanization of people combined with their desire to have more – their wants and greed resulted in the death and displacement of whole groups of people (Native Americans). The recently acquired land became British colonies. British people began to migrate to these newly formed colonies, often to escape religious persecution, but the people failed to imagine what living in territory controlled by the British crown would be like. The British crown wanted more money and unfairly imposed taxes on the colonists. At the same time, to accumulate their own wealth in this “new” territory colonists turned to slavery. Instead of using their own body to work, they used slaves to do the work for them. Industrialization would come years later, but even then, ‘civilization’ valued bodily comforts at the expense of human life.

In the United States during colonialism, wealth and the accumulation goods topped the list of the purpose of a ‘civilization’ as defined by the British. Forced slavery was practiced and plantation owners as well as wealthy colonizers enslaved their hearts and minds to luxuries, while dehumanizing and using violence against the “others” that stood in their way (Native Americans) and were key people in their accumulation of wealth (through slaves).

An understanding of Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization and meaning of a true civilization will promote critical thinking amongst students and develop an understanding of the motives that led to colonialism. Students will be able to identify greed, accumulation of wealth, and the dehumanization of people as main critiques of modern civilization. At the same time, students will identify self-sustenance, the restoration of humanity, and moral regeneration as key components of a true civilization. Students will then be able to make connections between British imperialism in India and colonialism in the United States.

**Teaching Activities:**
- Read aloud the book, “Those Shoes”. Begin a class discussion to define and list examples of needs and wants. Possible conversation prompts:
  - The character in the book wanted shoes his family could not afford. Have you ever wanted something your family couldn’t afford? How did that make you feel? How do you think your parents or guardians felt?
  - The character buys shoes that are too small for him. Why does he do this? Does he need these shoes? Will they make his life better?
  - At the end of the story, the character gives his shoes to a friend who needs them. How did the character change throughout the story? What realization did he have about wants and needs?
- Begin to identify consumption as a centralized idea and action in our lives. Students will write journals entries in their writers’ notebooks to reflect about their habits as consumers. Possible writing prompts:
  - Think about a time you wanted something that you couldn’t have for one reason or another. Describe that material item. Include emotions, inner thoughts, setting, and dialogue.
  - Keep track of all the material goods you, your parents, family, and/or friends buy/give you for a whole week. Reflect on whether these are items you want,
need, neither, or both.

- Students will use their history books and watch a PowerPoint presentation demonstrating how an accumulation of wealth drove colonizers to continue colonizing and oppressing people they considered to be “uncivilized”.

**Materials:**

- Digital Projector
- Laptop with PowerPoint
- Social Studies textbook
- Book, “Those Shoes”
- Writer’s Notebook

**Bibliography:**
