

Hind Swaraj in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

In my opinion, it is a book which can be put into the hands of a child. It teaches gospel of that of love in place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force.¹

Hind Swaraj or *Indian Home Rule* brings forth Gandhiji's novel concepts of freedom, truth and non-violence. Written in simplest of the ways, it is the most powerful presentation of Mahatma Gandhi's vision of the nature of freedom from British imperial rule. This freedom is named as 'Swaraj'. De facto, *Hind Swaraj* is unquestionably something more than his thoughts of freedom from the British. It is, indeed, a cultural,

political and spiritual manifesto for the present era.

'Swaraj' is Gandhi's theoretical posit which offers the idea of 'nation' as against Western 'nation'. The Western concept of nation is exclusivist and looks at other societies as 'the other', which in the want of civilization require western hegemony. Gandhi's concept of 'nation' is not informed of the western philosophy but has its basis in native religious and philosophy thought system. However, much before Gandhi's discourse, the term Swaraj had gained considerable currency in the political vocabulary of India before Gandhi gave serious thought to it. The term Swaraj was used by Bal Gangadhar Tilak as late as 1896-97; yet the reactionary policy of Lord Curzon culminating in the partition of Bengal in 1905 whipped up nationalist

¹ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 5

sentiment. It became the philosophy of action of Bengali, Maharashtrian and Punjabi nationalists under the leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipinchandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh. Bal Gangadhar Tilak had made swaraj his “birth right”.

The term Swaraj appeared in Gandhi’s writings for the first time on November 3, 1906, while Gandhi was writing about Shyamji Krishna Verma. Speaking about him and swaraj, Gandhi writes,

His message is service to this country. The idea underlying his service is that there should be complete swaraj for Indian and that the British should quit the country handing over power to Indians...²

Gandhi gave serious thought to the question of swaraj in the year 1903 and during his return voyage from London to South Africa, in his answer to the Indian School of Violence and its prototype in South Africa. In fact,

swaraj is indigenous social, religious and political speculation that helps counter Western imperialism, colonization, capitalism and their untoward consequent category called the ‘third world’. The conceptual framework enables our thinkers to receive western theories and categories critically so as to rule out their subtle hidden agenda that always hails the west as ‘donor’s’ tradition and the orient, viz. India as ‘receiver’s’ tradition. Moreover, Gandhian discourse requires one to understand scope and depth of terms which he uses such as *Swaraj*, *Satyagraha*, *Ahimsa*, *Seva*, *Dharma*, *Swadeshi*, *Stri Kelavani* among others. Each term is a discourse in itself and was aimed at internal colonization (i.e. social degradation) as well as external colonization (i.e. British Raj).

GANDHIJI’S VIEWS ON SWARAJ

Swaraj means self-rule and has its source in the ancient Hindu philosophy. Gandhiji says, “The word swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and

² *Gandhi in To-Day’s India*, eds. Dr. B. C. Das, & Dr. G. P Mishra, p. 2

not freedom from all restraint which 'independence' often means."³

Gandhi considers swaraj as the People's Swaraj which, according to him is four-dimensional consisting of political, social, economic and moral facets. Gandhi considers them as constituting "the Square of Swaraj". The Square of Swaraj includes the following issues.

1. Political Dimension of Swaraj

Gandhi believed that mere freedom from British yoke and a new Indian rule may not solve the real riddle. To him, the nature and spirit of the government are more important than the colour of the skin or nationality of the governing class. Thus, Gandhi rejected outright the notion of swaraj in the sense of transfer of political power from the British administrative cliques to the hands of ruling coterie of natives. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi squarely puts, "We want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is

to say, you would make India English".⁴

According to Gandhi, in a democratic country, each individual must have his share, irrespective of religion, caste, sex or race. That apart, the people of the formed government should have a motto of welfare of the people rather than their own benefits. The rulers or centre of the power should be a guide or protector of the nation. They should serve the people of the nation rather than taking privileges that are tabooed to the common man. He says, "Parliament is simply a costly toy of the nation. The Prime Minister is more concerned about his power than about the welfare of Parliament."⁵

Besides, the government should be truly of the people and not only in form. The people constitute the sovereign power in such a government or as Gandhi said there shall be "Sovereignty of the People." The government is answerable to the

³ *Gandhian Thought* (ed.) by Bhardwaj, K.K. p. 124

⁴ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* by Gandhi, M.K. p. 26

⁵ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* by Gandhi, M.K. pp. 28-29

people and when the time of final analysis comes, people should be in the position to hold the reign. In a way, the welfare of the people would be the real test of the nature of the government rather than any group or sectional interest. In such a position, the real sovereign—the people—must be in a position to take an account of and assert its ultimate sovereign authority. Thus, the government under swaraj or Gandhian conception will be democratic through and through not only in form but also in spirit and content.

2. Social Dimension of Swaraj

The thought of the People's Swaraj, made Gandhi think of People's equality irrespective of their religion, caste, sex or race. He envisioned the society as one devoid of artificial or man-made barrier.

The social content of national swaraj means of communal hierarchy and suppression by one community on the others. It also meant that various communities should follow the ideal of peaceful co-existence. When Gandhi talks of the condition of India with reference to the Hindu and the Mohammedans, he clearly mentions, "If the Hindus believe that

India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland."⁶

Gandhi realized that swaraj; a real state of people should not allow a special privilege to the community or individual. Everybody must have the same social status. There should be removal of the social evils of untouchability and the Verna. Women should also enjoy an equal status.

Thus, swaraj as visualized by Gandhi was not only the vision of a balanced society but a society which promotes all-round development of all the individuals in every field, i.e., moral, intellectual, material prosperity, physical fitness and social stature.

3. Economic Dimension of Swaraj

Political dimension of the project Enlightenment in the West and western notion of 'nation' that sees other cultures and societies as the 'other' led the Great Britain to

⁶ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* by Gandhi, M.K. p. 43

subjugate India. In order to counter the subtle and multifaceted colonialism, Gandhi first aimed at social and economic emancipation of the masses. Human and natural resources were exploited through trade and administration by British, which proved the Indian mass economically most vulnerable. Hence when Gandhi thought of the economic aspect of swaraj, he had primarily in his mind removal of the misery of these millions.

Gandhi saw this task to be much pronged. The task was not just to eliminate the exploiters whose exploitation was the root of the misery but to provide basic facilities and opportunities to the poor and underprivileged. Gandhiji had rightly perceived that mere elimination of British political rule would not suffice to the condition because they have spread their roots very deeply in Indian Economic System. So even without the direct pressure of the exploiters, exploitation would take place covertly. He rightly said,

It is machinery that has impoverished India. It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian

handicraft has all but disappeared.⁷

The important thing in Gandhi's model of Swaraj is that every individual is to have an opportunity to fulfill one's basic needs of body and mind. Further the masses should be availed of economic profits garnered by the state.

To be free from economic exploitation and have fulfillment of basic needs Gandhi emphasis the use of Swadeshi. He says that Swadeshi would be the foundation stone of swaraj. According to him, swadeshi is that spirit within us which restricts us to the use of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. Method, means, environment of production; consumption of that production and man's role in this process is vital to any self-reliant society. If a man is reduced just to a consumer, than his social institutions become parasitic. Self denigration, abhorrence for everything native, cult worship for everything foreign, fetish for

⁷ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 81

dominating culture and intellectual servility are a few effects of economics exploitation that 'swadeshi' fights against. Swadeshi, even today, is not just an economic concept but a strategy to counter unwholesome hegemony of colonial and neo-colonial forces.

4. Moral Dimension of Swaraj

According to Gandhi, the moral dimension is the most significant one for People's Swaraj. Gandhi treated swaraj as a synonym of 'Ramrajya'. By Ramrajya he doesn't mean Hindu Raj, but the Divine Raj. According to the moral principles, that would inspire righteous conduct of individuals and the political, social and economic systems under swaraj in a just and appropriate manner. Gandhi warned against the vices of Western civilization and their materialistic mammon worship and advocated freedom from its clutches. In the western aggressive, empirical hedonism he saw an irreligious and immoral tone that disintegration man-his roots, values and ideals which are merits of this oldest surviving civilization. Unlike the West, ours is 'duty oriented' civilization and not 'right oriented'. By civilization, Gandhi primarily meant, "Mode of

conduct which points out to man *the path of duty*. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions."⁸

Civilization in Gujarati is, 'Good Conduct' i.e., righteousness. Gandhi perceived that deterioration has encroached upon the morality principle of human being because of industrial growth. People are devoting their whole energy to increase wealth and bodily comforts. As Rousseau has rightly said that everyman finds his profiting in the misfortune of neighbors. People are crazy about material pleasure. Gandhi considers this situation as the result of the Western influence. Comparing both the civilizations, he says, "The tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality."⁹

He observed that even in the profession of Lawyers and Doctors, immorality has made its space. They have introduced rottenness in the domain of public service for their

⁸ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 53

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 55

selfish private profits. Gradually other professional activities follow suit and vie with each other for their capital gain at all cost. These professions, he says, "Teaches immorality, it is exposed to temptation from which few are saved."¹⁰

Emphasis on self-restraint and self-rule remained a significant cornerstone of Gandhi's moral dimension of Swaraj. He attempted to distinguish between swaraj and independence. Independence may signify freedom from any external control whereas swaraj necessarily signifies self-restraint.

Apart from self-restraint or self-rule, Gandhi also laid stress on performance of one's duty. Hence he said, "Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms."¹¹

By performance of duty, Gandhi puts forward the idea of Swadharma in one's respective field. Thus, observance of duty would naturally provide rights to the

individual. Thus, swaraj of Gandhian conception for its realization is very much dependent on the morally sanctified conduct of the individual with its emphasis of self-restraint and honest performance of one's duty.

Gandhi was a practical idealist, when he thought of swaraj. He also gave serious thought to the question of appropriate strategies for the attainment of the same. The strategy prescribed and adopted by Gandhi is multidimensional in nature.

Gandhi, being an apostle of non-violence, did not find favor with the violent activities in the country. He had particularly formed the cornerstone of the Indian cultural heritage by adopting this technique. As he says, "Her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection."¹²

For him the nature, quality and character of the end were completely dependent upon the means. And if the end is good and noble, it cannot be attained by evil and ignoble means. Moreover, application of violent

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 48

¹¹ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 53

¹² *Ibid.* p.

techniques would not be able to bring about real deliverance of the masses. Importantly, when he sides with non-violence, he does not mean cowardice but it is of the strong and brave. He advocates the technique of 'Passive Resistance'. The term passive resistance was passive only in the sense absence of violence or active armed action. It was really active in the sense of offering resistance to the alien ruling power with the help of 'soul force'. He remarks, "Real Home Rule is possible only where passive resistance is the guiding force of the people."¹³

Thus, Gandhi's most potent weapon for wresting power from the foreign rulers was one of non-violence and specifically speaking 'Satyagraha', that was tempered with self-sacrifice and absence of ill-will for the ruling power.

Identifying swaraj with self-restraint, he rightly remarked that lack of self-restraint in us encouraged English merchants to get a footing within our nation. Self-rule also means

control of one's passion. Passion for all kinds of facilities which come from western system and materialistic power should be controlled by one's self. To him, self-control would fulfill all the conditions to attain 'the Square of Swaraj'. So, he puts it as the means to attain swaraj.

The Gandhian vision of swaraj in the positive sense presupposes adoption of political and economic decentralization eliminating the possibility of exploitative centers so that choices and decisions are available at the grass root level and the benefits can be directly commensurate to these.

To sum up, one can say that Gandhi's concept of swaraj defers signally from the concept of swaraj in general. It is not only in the freedom from British domination but what is more important is the development of the nation in a definite direction. The positive aspect of this concept would lead us to attain Purna Swaraj.

SWARAJ IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As soon as we think or discuss of the 21st century, all kinds of crises encroach upon our thoughts. It leads us to several questions of national crises, communal conflicts and social

¹³ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 72

inequality. All these together discolour the image of Gandhi's 'Ramarajya'. The problems of modern life suggest us to go back to Gandhian philosophy for the solutions. Though Gandhi and his philosophy are misunderstood as anti-civilization, anti-machinery and so on in modern times, we will have to turn back to it, only to have convincing solutions of our problems. Life is unity. It cannot be divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious, because "All act and react upon one another."¹⁴

But modern life is becoming more and more divisive. So, in a way we need to go back to all the Gandhian ideas and try to relate them vis-à-vis problems in the 21st century.

We know what democracy is in the modern times, but we are yet to learn and understand the meaning of democracy in which freedom and justice can both go hand in hand. Democracy means 'people' in the centre but in today's time, this concept has been misused. Gandhi has rightly given the metaphor of a 'prostitute-house' for the parliament where on a

business goes along with a kind of tug of war for power.

Gandhiji's words sound like a prophecy when he warned "there is no politics devoid of religion. Politics bereft of religion is a death-trap." What Gandhi meant by religion is not dry and dead ritualism but moral and ethical basis of our whole life. Real politics is merely the application of the moral principle of justice in terms of social relations. Our political representatives and intelligentsia need to understand Gandhi, instead of using his ideology merely in the speech or debunk it in order to appear 'modern' and 'fashionable'. Both the uncritical subscription to Gandhian ideology and the mindless rejection of it are equally unwise.

Economic system is the backbone for any nation. Fluctuations in this system cause serious problems of income and employment. But all these problems have become 'serious' because we are chiefly and at some extent only concerned for them. The dichotomy between our social and economic systems continues to exist. Hence, as a first step, we have to try to socialize the wealth of the top industrial houses and for the medium

¹⁴ *The Relevance of Gandhian Thought*, ed. Verma, K.M.P. p. 153

sized business houses; a system of worker's participation of equality has to be evolved.

Being a propagator of agrarian society, Gandhi opposed mechanization. In modern times, following Gandhian ideology, we should also support the agrarian activities and small-scale industries, because through mechanization of agriculture, there is *Rape of the Earth*¹⁵ degrading the soil to quench our inordinate lust for wealth and power. So, Gandhi rightly remarks, "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin."¹⁶

So, if we follow Gandhian ideas we would have some options at our hand. There would be:

- Agricultural self-sufficiency which would lead to fulfilling the primary needs.
- Establishment of industries should be encouraged by our own entrepreneurs so that all

kind of development and prosperity belong to us.

- This would make people follow Gandhi's Divine Law of Bread Labor and provide rural employment which would encourage human labour instead of comforts of machines.
- The human labour would make a healthy nation.
- It would create social harmony and feeling of concern for fellow citizens.

It would ultimately give a sustainable development to the nation and individual as well by lessening moral deterioration.

Thus, by following all these ideas including Swadeshi and principle of Trusteeship, India would create a kind of path to be more and more self-reliant in the present time.

Setting right our political and economic goals keeping within the framework our moral values would ultimately take care of the other aspects of our society and make us achieve Home Rule in the true sense whose gist can be as follows:

¹⁵ *The Relevance of Gandhian Thought*, ed. Verma, K.M.P. p. 158

¹⁶ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 81

- Real Home-Rule is self-rule or self-control.
- The way to it is passive resistance: that is soul force or love force.
- In order to exert this force, swadeshi in every sense is necessary.
- What we want to do should be done, not because we object to the English or because we want to retaliate but because it is our duty to do so.¹⁷

So, Gandhi's views on the nation-state are undoubtedly post-modern particularly because they are based on decentralization, assimilation tolerance and non-violence. And they are applicable even today.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's worldview is not just notional and theoretical but all of his ideas and concepts were integral to the living reality of his life and they continue to be so for millions even today. Gandhi's worldview exemplified Upanishadik wisdom that sought self-realization through

lokasamgraha (collective welfare). That the Gandhian thought still prevails not only in India and his influence is as strong as ever can be seen from the fact that 44th President of U.S.A., Barack Obama has mentioned about the profound effect (My Experiments with Truth) has had on his life.¹⁸ And the Indian youth too has started having a positive faith in 'Gandhism' which is an indication of a new dawn for our society.

In this way, *Hind Swaraj* represents a critique of modern India and ends up offering fresh ideals to the nation. An eminent critic has already arrived at this conclusion when he writes:

(Gandhi's) project.....is one of overcoming modernism without regressing to traditionalism. In his approach there is a merging of the reconstruction of Indian tradition and the reconstruction of Western modernity.

¹⁸ *Gujarat Samachhar*, "Americana Pramukh Obama: Privartanni Navi Disha"; Dt. 21st Jan.'09, p. 10.

¹⁷ *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi, M.K. p. 90

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