

## *Prakritik Swaraj*

*“Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream.”*

**- Mahatma Gandhi<sup>i</sup>**

Speaking of *swaraj* in the 21st century, one feels assured that one is aiming to recover and revitalize a vision which belongs to a strong indigenous stream of Indian philosophical thought, culture and political practice.

Let us contemplate the word ‘*swaraj*’. Its etymological origins in Sanskrit are simple and obvious: *swa* (self) + *rajya* (rule) = *swaraj* (self-rule). The adjective ‘*prakritik*’ can be understood as ‘natural’, or as expressing human nature so as to remain in rhythm with the natural world around us.

As a concept, *swaraj* was first thought of in a classical Indian language, or perhaps in an Indian vernacular. In this sense, it is (unlike democracy, derived from the Greek ‘*demos*’) indigenous to India.

Such notions did not swim in a historical and cultural vacuum. There is evidence of face-to-face political assemblies - including at the village level - in Ancient India. Sources - both oral and documented - reveal traditions of government by discussion and consultation and sometimes of decisions taken by dialogue and consensus.<sup>ii</sup>

The important thing to remember is that these notions (in Sanskrit or Pali) - from which some of the vocabulary of modern Indian democracy is drawn - predate the colonial era by centuries, often by millennia, and are, by no means, translations of concepts imported into India from the Western world. It means that these were notions in use in one period of Indian history or another and became substantially dormant, often with the coming of colonial rule in the modern period.

So Gandhi did not dream up the idea of “village republics”, of *gram swaraj*, out of thin air. In 1909, he published his most important work *Hind Swaraj*. The associations of the word *swaraj* change quite dramatically when deployed by Tilak during the early phase of the Indian freedom struggle in the 1890s. It seems to become virtually equivalent to the mod-

ern Western notion of liberty and independence. When Dadabhai Naoroji, as President of the Indian National Congress declares swaraj, in 1906, to be the goal of the national movement he has this very limited meaning in mind. Gandhi's vision went well beyond this.

Aware of its ancient lineage, Gandhi wrote in *Young India*, in 1931, of swaraj as "a sacred word, a Vedic word". He hoped that India and the world could recover the idea of swaraj, and realise it one day.<sup>iii</sup>

For Gandhi, authentic self-rule is possible if and only if the self is capable of being its own sovereign. Gandhi is religious. He believes that without transcendence, it is impossible for the self to become sovereign over its life. For him the notion is as spiritual as it is political. But, importantly, the causation works only one way. Ultimately, for Gandhi, swaraj is a divine imperative, with fruitful consequences for human affairs. Spiritual mastery and self-possession can also yield the marvels of political sovereignty, as a by-product, but not the other way around.

Politically, self-rule, as Gandhi understands it, is anything but modern parliamentary democracy. He mocks modern parliaments as "emblems of slavery", It is unfortunate that swaraj is frequently translated as 'democracy'. In fact, their cognitive premises could not be more different.

Firstly, swaraj is inconsistent with mass politics, an everyday fact of democracies today. Where finite, face-to-face neighbourhood assemblies are not viable, swaraj cannot function. Crowds can serve as the grease for political parties in democracies, not for swaraj. Numbers and their comparisons are as crucial to modern democracies as they are irrelevant to swaraj.

Secondly, modern democracy is focused on the individual's direct, unmediated relationship to a state that guarantees her rights of citizenship by law. The setting *assumed* for this relationship is one of an atomised society in which human alienation is normalized. What swaraj needs for its nourishment, by contrast, is a community in which the individual can come into her own through filial, cultural, social, political, economic and ecological relationships with those (including sentient beings other than the humans) around her.

Thirdly, in a modern democracy, an individual is, almost indifferently, and in the name of 'freedom', left to his tastes and desires (all of modern economics rests on this assumption), the community playing no part in mak-

ing him scrutinise them. There is no obligation for the individual to consider his desires in a critical light, unless and until their realisation interferes with the fulfilment of another's desires. In fact, such is virtually the very definition of 'freedom' in modern liberal democracies, often understood in terms of the notion of 'negative liberty'.

Gandhi's idea of swaraj could not be more different. It has to do with an individual's or a community's autonomy to *create* their choices, rather than passively accepting the menu from which they must *choose*. Applied to our market-driven, media-prompted world, it would first require us to take ecological and cultural responsibility for our desires and explore their origins in passions stoked by advertising. It is evident that such a manipulation of desire, in which virtually everything is at stake, is antithetical to freedom for any advocate of swaraj. Desire, which is at the philosophical heart of the notion of freedom in modern consumer democracies, is the inevitable object of critical scrutiny for any serious student of swaraj, especially given the context of an ecologically imperilled world.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the idea of swaraj continues to inspire social, political and ecological movements in India. Instances - from the struggle for the rehabilitation of communities displaced by development, undertaken by the National Alliance of People's Movements, to the recently begun Swaraj Abhiyan - are many.

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<sup>i</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj: A Critical Edition*, (Annotated, edited and translated by Suresh Sharma and Tridip Suhrud), Orient Blackswan, Delhi, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Steven Muhlberger, "Republics and Quasi-Democratic Institutions in Ancient India", in *The Secret History of Democracy*, Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell (Eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, March 19, 1931.