

Notes on swaraj

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THREE significant political categories to emerge from the nationalist period in Indian history are *swaraj*, *swadeshi* and *satyagraha*. Nationalist leaders used certain English approximations for these, so that 'swaraj' meant home rule, 'swadeshi' meant self-reliance, mainly of an economic type, and 'satyagraha', the most complex of the three, was translated by M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) as 'soul force', though it is usually (mis)named 'passive resistance'. These terms came into the Indian political lexicon for a period of about 50 years, and apparently faded away from common usage after Independence, together with the varieties of political belief and practice that they signified.

I began to think about them for the first time when I had to teach modern Indian history in my undergraduate classroom. It was only as I taught their literal and philosophical meanings to my students, over layers of linguistic and cultural difference, that I realized these words were not mere historical artefacts. Their conceptual genealogies, their moral power, their complicated relationship with Indian and western ethics and metaphysics surprised me time and again. Every semester that I assigned Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, Tagore's *Ghare Baire*, Attenborough's *Gandhi*, and Nehru's *Discovery of India*, among other texts, I became increasingly conscious of communicating not only a turbulent era of history (say, 1857-1947), full of the drama of anti-colonial, nationalist and communal politics, but also the very ideas that provide the hidden or explicit foundations of political life in the Indian nation.

The three words belong to a long list of new political categories, coined from about the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 to the promulgation of the Constitution of India in 1950 – a list that includes such groundbreaking terms as *Dalit*, *Harijan*, *Pakistan* and *Hindutva*. These terms were not just new words for old phenomena, but rather created what they named, bringing entirely novel entities into existence. Of course there had been untouchables for centuries, but the constitutive link between outcaste status and righteous anger in 'Dalit' ('Crushed') was a first. What made it possible to connect a particular social experience with a particular political affect, in this case, was the history of equal citizenship and human rights. The Gandhian 'Harijan' ('Child of God') instead interpreted low caste subjectivity within a political theology of redemption, purification and salvation, so that a separate set of users would choose 'Harijan' over 'Dalit', with their attendant politics.

Like caste hierarchy, Islam had been on the subcontinent for a very long time, but the idea of a nation of South Asian Muslims had no precedent. The presuppositions that allowed the idea of 'Pakistan' to gather momentum after 1940 were the very form of the modern nation-state, the new demography with its majorities and minorities, and

the recently instituted communal electorate. Colonial pseudo-sciences, biopolitical governmentality and racialized understandings of history were among the factors that led Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) to posit 'Hindutva', 'Hindu cultural essence'. Even a word like *ahimsa* ('non-violence'), seemingly as old as Jain and Buddhist philosophical systems, was given fresh purchase in Gandhi's lexicon.

In considering this novel terminology, what I found fascinating was the immense creativity of Indian politics during the last stages of British rule in India, the propensity of its leaders and thinkers to fashion the tools they needed to best comprehend and reorder their reality. But more than just the creativity of this period, I was struck by its profoundly ethical engagement with the very nuts and bolts of politics: What constitutes the self? What constitutes sovereignty? What is the relationship between the two?

For Gandhi writing *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, to think about 'swaraj' meant not just to address the obvious historical circumstance of British colonial rule over India, but also to meditate upon the larger question of why the West – by which he meant capitalism, industrialism, imperialism and nationalism – had come to dominate the world. For the Mahatma the challenge was two-fold: India not only needed to attain the freedom to govern itself as a polity, but Indian civilization had to come back into its own with its full array of social, economic, political and moral forms of life, some traditional and some modern. Only half of his programme was ever realized, in 1947 or beyond.

Over sixty years after independence, the 'stream of life' in India – Gandhi's words for 'civilization' are all constructed around the kernel '*dhara*' – has not returned to what he considered its 'true' or proper course. If anything, globalization in India is in full spate. The project of swaraj therefore is still incomplete, as it was a century ago. Added to the question of cultural identity – the finding of a sovereign Indian selfhood against western hegemony – there is now the question of the numerous selves that India denies political expression to and encloses, often violently, within itself.

The importance of a term like 'swaraj', then, turns out to be far from limited to the decades when India was struggling to attain political self-rule. Both in its orientation vis-à-vis a larger world of competing political and economic systems, as well as in its stance towards forcibly and incompletely assimilated sub-national groups, India must confront anew the question that Gandhi asked: How is the relationship between the self and sovereignty to be made ethical? For Gandhi the self had to be strongly anchored in truth (*satya*) and strictly disciplined by non-violence (*ahimsa*). The fashioning of such a self and the achievement of mastery over it were as much public and political processes as they were personal and moral ones. The relevance – indeed the centrality, the urgency – of these processes has in no way diminished with the passage of time.

The Muslim world today, especially in India's geo-political neighbourhood (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran), is convulsed by deep anxieties and terrible conflicts over the problem of self and sovereignty. In Kashmir the term used is *azadi*, whose meaning fluctuates between political self-determination, more subtle questions of ethnic, religious and cultural identity, as well as the problem of violence and its limits. This is not to say that all manner of highly determinate, historically contingent forms of political organization, mobilization and expression, together with their specific social and economic goals, may be collapsed into the idea of swaraj. But it is to suggest that we understand the elegance of swaraj (in the way that a *sutra* or a theorem can be 'elegant') as a concept that cuts to the heart of political categories as distinct as Islamic *jihad* and Naxalite *kranti* by highlighting what is essential to a variety of contemporary forms of struggle: the ligature of self and sovereignty.

The advantage of using a word like 'swaraj' is that we are constantly reminded, in its use, of its most significant modern author, Gandhi, for whom swaraj was necessarily to be associated with ahimsa: the effort to master the self had to go together with the courage not to harm the other.

Prior to Gandhi's intervention, it was Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) who was best known for his use of the term 'swaraj'. The slogan he gave was 'Swaraj is my birth-right and I shall have it!' – wherein a political contest of wills with the British circumscribed the meaning of swaraj to self-rule by, for and of Indians. Gandhi insisted that replacing British rule by Indian rule was not going to change anything, for it was not merely a question of self-rule (*swaraj*), but rather of clarifying exactly what is meant by self, what is meant by rule, and what sort of a relation is to be established between these two.

For Gandhi the matter of India's swaraj had not only to do with the discourse of rights (*adhikar*) – it was grounded as much in righteousness (*dharma*). Agency and responsibility, mastery and non-violence, self and other, resistance and surrender, courage and suffering, experience and principle, choice and cowardice, were all brought into new dialectical and chiasmic alignments with respect to one another in the rubric of swaraj. Gandhi's rendering of swaraj from Tilak's 'right to self-government' to 'control over the self' in *Hind Swaraj* had the quality of an epiphany, palpable in the text even a hundred years later. He transformed the question of who could or should rule India from a problem of political domination to a problem of moral mastery.

Further, and even more powerfully, he made 'India' stand for each and every individual: to rule India was to rule the self; to master the self was to master India. This extraordinary transference projects the selfhood of the individual to another scale altogether. Beyond a human being who has rights, beyond the subject of an empire, beyond the citizen of a nation, I become India; India becomes me. My sovereign being and India's sovereign being converge, so that fundamentally individual acts, like fasting, or prayer, or spinning cotton, or practising celibacy – acts whose causes and effects might seem limited to my body and my mind – become political acts. Gandhi took an abstract collective political enterprise and reinserted it into my

consciousness, your consciousness, and the consciousness of every person who has struggled with the greatest of all tyrants: the self.

In keeping the self at the centre of his argument, Gandhi stands squarely within the tradition of Indian metaphysical systems. The departure – and it is no small departure – he represents, lies in fusing metaphysical inquiry with political struggle. (He is absolutely right, therefore, to acknowledge the *Bhagavad Gita* as the pillar of his entire effort as a political thinker). The achievement of representative democracy cannot and does not, as we have seen over the past six decades, in any way exhaust the larger metaphysical issues surrounding selfhood and sovereignty that Gandhi sought to address: my vote is not my self; my self is not my vote. ‘What you call swaraj,’ Gandhi said to his invisible addressees, Tilak, Savarkar, and other nationalists at the turn of the century, ‘is not truly swaraj.’ Many of the discontents of Indian democracy can be traced to our failure to heed Gandhi’s warning about what swaraj is not, as much as to our neglect of several aspects of his elaboration of what swaraj is.

B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Gandhi’s younger contemporary, his intimate enemy, his inveterate opponent, resembled the Mahatma in at least this way: Ambedkar, too, I would argue, returned to the metaphysical question at the heart of the Indian political tradition, by converting, just before his death, to a kind of Buddhism. The arc of Siddhartha Gautama’s thought/life went from political apprenticeship as a young Sakya prince, to disillusionment and introspection as a wandering ascetic, to a disavowal of the unitary, stable self as the Buddha Sakyamuni. Ambedkar also, seemed to turn from politics to the Buddhist *Dhamma* (albeit in a revisionist neo-Buddhism of his own devising). But this happened so close to his death that it might be difficult for us to judge the full implications of his conversion. Did the author of Dalit subjectivity really stop believing in the existence of a self-same self?

Many of India’s founding figures are not nationalists in a straightforward fashion – indeed, their relationship to nationalism can range from antagonistic to agonistic. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) absolutely rejected nationalism, both as the aspiration of still-colonized people for nationhood, and as the pride and assertiveness of free and powerful nations. Prior to his outright rejection of nationalism, Tagore had already distanced himself from swadeshi ideology, even in the face of severe criticism from others in Bengal. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) went from political radicalism in the first part of his life, flirting occasionally with violent forms of cultural nationalism, to a complete withdrawal from politics and a total immersion in metaphysics for the remainder of his life.

Gandhi’s complex positions on power, office, the nation-state form, Partition, Independence, war, etc. are well-known: needless to say, he had almost none of the trappings of a conventional leader of such immense political authority and personal charisma. His beliefs were eccentric, and in retrospect it seems amazing that he commanded the kind of respect from the people of India that he did for more than half his life.

Ambedkar, also, for all his participation in relatively ‘normal’ forms of political activity throughout his career, left us with the conundrum of his turn to Buddhism at the very end of his life. Of the founders of the republic it was only Jawaharlal Nehru (1884-1964) who followed anything like a straight path: from anti-colonial struggle, to popular elections and limited self-government, to independence and decolonization, to the making of a constitution, to the governance of the post-colonial Indian nation for its first seventeen years as a democracy. If we consider swaraj through the lens of Nehru, then the concept is at once diminished, realized and historicized. In Nehru’s trajectory, swaraj – India’s capacity of self-rule – was fought for and achieved over a period of time; afterwards the task at hand changed to actually governing one of the world’s largest and poorest nations. For better or worse, the Utopian dimensions of swaraj gave way to the exigencies of nation-building.

Unlike other ethical concepts that combine the means of revolutionary action with the ends of political liberation and the institution/restoration of a just order, such as jihad, kranti, azadi, etc., swaraj does not enfold within itself the contingency of violence. Perhaps this is what makes it both attractive for a theory of ethical action, but also more difficult, in practice (and absent an advocate like Gandhi), for a people, a group or a nation to pursue in a continuous and consistent way. According to Akeel Bilgrami, Gandhi’s brilliant introduction of non-violence into his political method is what made the difference between either narrow, elite-led protest of a polite constitutional variety, or vanguard revolutionary action, and genuine mass nationalism in colonial India. But now that India is free, and there is no empire for it to resist non-violently, swaraj loses some of its oppositional energy, and needs to become primarily an inquiry into India’s self and sovereignty.

The other impediment to the popularity, as it were, of swaraj in India today, is the fact that it is something that each person must cultivate within his or her mind – it may affect collective destinies, but it remains at base a solitary praxis. The self that it addresses is first and foremost the individual self, and only through a gradual concatenation or expansion does this self grow to eventually form a collective self. Gandhi describes at length the internal, meditative and ascetic dimensions of the struggle for swaraj. Satyagraha and ahimsa are at the heart of what it means to believe in and aspire to swaraj, whether for oneself, one’s community or one’s country. These psychological, spiritual and corporeal practices are the very opposite of the group-oriented disciplinary practices advocated in, say, Hindutva ideology, which has a distinctly Fascist character.

Savarkar’s notion of sovereignty (*padpadshahi*) as territorial domination and the rule of force has nothing in common with Gandhi’s swaraj. It was swaraj that captured the popular imagination and gained millions of adherents during the freedom struggle, while Hindutva remained marginal until the 1990s, when it appeared for a time to take many Indians along in the immediate wake of the arrival of market reforms and consumer capitalism. Now that Hindutva is in recession again, it may be the best opportunity to reopen a wide-ranging public discussion on swaraj, its challenges notwithstanding. Even 60 years after Independence, the fact remains that most citizens cannot imagine India becoming a free country without the role that Gandhi played.

Swaraj is a modern political category. It cannot be found in the political thought of Indic premodernity. While its constituent elements – self and sovereignty – have had sustained traditions of reflection associated with them, never before the late 19th century were the two at once linked to one another and simultaneously placed in the context of a political project. In its first iteration – that used by Tilak and other nationalists in the 1890s – ‘swaraj’ was a direct translation of western ‘liberty’, hence ‘home rule’. But in Gandhi’s reiteration of 1909, swaraj acquired both moral and political meanings, grounded in the individual but embracing society as a whole. Gandhian swaraj marries ethics, metaphysics and politics. It also draws on both Indian and western traditions of thought.

On the one hand it refers to Indian practices of contemplating the nature of the self (*atman*) placed within a set of rationally comprehensible relations between the phenomenal world (*samsara*), the chain of human action (*karma*), and a normative order (*dharma*). The liberation (*moksa*) of this self, in the sense of its release out of the realm of facticity into the realm of potentiality, is the ultimate goal of such contemplation. On the other hand, swaraj also refers to western practices of theorizing the human individual as a unit of political life (*bios*), and seeking a political order (*polis*) that maximizes the human capacity for self-fulfilment, i.e., an order based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The hybrid nature of Gandhi’s swaraj as a category made it appealing to people across a range of political convictions: those enamoured of western democracy, as well as those versed in Indian contemplative philosophies. Even within Indian traditions, Gandhi takes eclectically, from Jainism, *bhakti*, Vaisnavism, the epics and the *Gita*; his sources in western thought too, are idiosyncratic, ranging from Christianity, to the American transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, to the Russian anarchist Tolstoy, among others.

The centenary of the publication of *Hind Swaraj* has occasioned a massive rethinking of this text. In 2009 historians, philosophers and political theorists across the world have re-opened Gandhi’s compact but inspired tract that effected, in my opinion, an epistemological break, a Galilean moment, in the Indian political tradition. To create a ligature between self and sovereignty; to see that the self could be particle and wave, individual self and national self; to see that liberty could mean both spiritual emancipation and political freedom; to prise apart sovereignty from violence and bind it to non-violence; to give to ordinary people the opportunity for exemplary moral action: these were all Gandhi’s achievements in that burst of inspiration, that stretch of 11 days in November 1909, when he wrote *Hind Swaraj* from start to finish on board ship.

Through that singular text, India's political thought – arrested by the failure of the swadeshi movement in Bengal and elsewhere, beset by the birth of communalism, floundering in the stalemate between impotent constitutionalism and misguided extremism, insufficiently guided by either Congress elites or fringe terrorists – was launched into an entirely new phase of its development. As a category, Gandhi's swaraj marks the overcoming of the crisis in India's political tradition. With the conceptual structure in place, for the next forty odd years the Mahatma would go on to steer Indian nationalism through many experiments, some successful and others not – non-cooperation, civil disobedience, non-violent resistance, *Khilafat*, satyagraha, and many more.

Gandhi was not a philosopher (as the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami points out), so that his work cannot be expected to read as systematic without considerable interpretive and exegetical work from a reader (like Bilgrami himself). His thought is further complicated by his actions as a leader of mass politics, a type of complication we do not need to contend with when reading most modern political philosophers of the West. However, Bilgrami makes a convincing case that Gandhi's thought, for all that it was not formally philosophical, has 'integrity', a quality that makes it worthy of deeper analytical investigation from the perspective of moral philosophy.

On Bilgrami's reading, central to Gandhi's philosophy, to whatever extent we can reconstruct it as such, is an attempt to sort out the relative weights of 'cognitive' versus 'experiential' understandings of the truth (*satya*). But in the framework of philosophy or otherwise, given Gandhi's attempt to argue thoroughly in *Hind Swaraj* how and why swaraj and ahimsa are to be constitutively related to one another, perhaps it is essential for future considerations of his thought to account for his decoupling of sovereignty and violence. This conceptual move sets him completely apart from major European thinkers on violence, law and sovereignty in his own time, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, for example, as well as their later commentators, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.

Gandhi's advocacy of ahimsa and satyagraha in the face of Nazi violence against European Jews or in his views on Palestine (as evidenced by his correspondence with Martin Buber in the 1930s), is not always easy to understand. A full-fledged critique of the limits and contradictions of Gandhian swaraj in the context of modern forms of genocide, biopolitics and exceptions to the rule of law, is yet to be attempted. After all Gandhi did live through some of the worst catastrophes of the 20th century, or indeed of human history: the World Wars, Hiroshima, Stalin's Gulags... Such a critique is important not only because Gandhi had – apparently – problematic views about the Holocaust, but also because closer home, we need a conceptually rigorous analysis of his stance on Partition and on Kashmir.

To put it briefly, suffering, courage, refusal and other such categories that Gandhi intended primarily in their psychological, affective and religious meanings may not travel from the ashram to the concentration camp or the refugee camp. Perhaps the

tactics that worked against imperialism, racism, colonialism and slavery could not be scaled up or down, nor translated, nor transformed, to confront totalitarianism. Perhaps Gandhi exaggerated the notion of moral action to such an extent as to deny the real predicament of undeserved and irremediable victimhood. Not all injustice, oppression and sheer harm may be resisted by the pure will of the *satyagrahi* ('seeker after truth'). How is a moral example to be set by any inmate of Auschwitz? Are resistance, defiance, disobedience and dissent meaningful in the event of what political theorist George Kateb, following Hannah Arendt, called 'political evil'?

Kateb defines this as large-scale, organized, structural, often cruel violence, enacted by and upon enormous numbers of people banal in themselves, instigated either by governments or by political movements, that is utterly distinct from the violence originating in human wickedness. He distinguishes 'political evil' from both 'political injustice' and 'political oppression', on the one hand, and on the other hand, from our ordinary human propensity to do harm, as and to individuals. It is possible that ultimately we cannot and will not find any philosophically satisfying meeting ground between 'soul force' and 'bare life', so extreme is the sovereign exceptionalism and necropolitical power of the state – not just the totalitarian but also the democratic state – in the 20th century.

It is also incumbent upon us to make sense of the divergence between Gandhi's attitude to communal violence and caste violence, both forms of violence endemic to colonial and post-colonial Indian society. We know Gandhi was anguished by violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims, or indeed any two religious groups; we also know that his condemnation of caste as an organizing principle of social life was not unequivocal, despite its inherent tendency to produce psychic and physical violence across lines of hierarchical difference. Rather, to all appearances he seemed to try and salvage caste as one of the essential features of true – read: Indian – civilization. The lonely and wounded figure of Gandhi in Noakhali is not easily reconciled with the stubborn and conservative Gandhi who spent years arguing against early forms of affirmative action. He cleaned toilets but he believed in inherited professions.

If Gandhi was alienated from Jinnah he was equally alienated from Ambedkar – both bad relationships that proved disastrous for India. We have seen some attempts to explain the stages of Gandhi's thought from a theory of personality – in effect, a sort of historical psychoanalysis, best embodied in the work of Ashis Nandy. But it could also be that to look *only* at Gandhi's achievements and defeats, his virtues and faults, his friends and enemies, is to both neglect history and fail at philosophy.

While a proper philosophical critique of swaraj is yet to be put forward, it is common to encounter casual accusations of anachronism and irrelevance against Gandhi. In the past 20 years, India seems to have committed itself to the civilizational stream, the way of life, the historical trajectory that Gandhi invariably prefixed with the moral qualifier of condemnation, '*ku*' – evil, not desirable, not defensible. What can such a rapidly globalizing, increasingly militarized, and communally divided India do with Gandhi's strictures?

In my view, it is precisely because India experiences itself as economically and militarily on the ascendant that a re-thinking of cultural, political and moral selfhood is timely. It is also appropriate to return to Gandhi because so much of India – its poor, its minorities, its separatist and dissenting constituencies in Kashmir and the Northeast – remain outside the consensus view of its superpower status. An Indian sovereignty that bans millions of citizens in zones of exception and abandons them to the most egregious forms of violence and deprivation is not consistent with the idea of swaraj.

General elections in May 2009 established that Indian democracy is functional in some logistical and statistical sense, but its ethical health, especially with regards to the most vulnerable segments of the population, remains dubious at best. There is no question that India must continue to engage intensely with self, sovereignty and swaraj. The Mahatma wrote a century ago: ‘It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream.’ (*Hind Swaraj*: Ch. 14).

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