

Searching for Gandhi of ‘Hind Swaraj’ in India’s ‘Swaraj’

Dr. Avadhanam Raghu Kumar
Hyderabad
avadhanamraghukumar@gmail.com

On 15 August 1947, when the crowds were swarming into New Delhi from all sides, and Nehru was about to deliver one of the finest speeches on such a great dawn, reminding the people of India of the culmination of ‘the tryst with destiny’ long years ago the people of India had made, *“The first uncertain sputtering of a candle had appeared in the windows of the house on Beliaghata Road just after 2 a.m., an hour ahead of Gandhi’s usual rising time. The glorious day when his people would savor at last their freedom should have been an apotheosis for Gandhi, the culmination of a life of struggle, the final triumph of a movement which had stirred the admiration of the world. It was anything but that. There was no joy in the heart of the man in Hydari House. The victory for which Gandhi had sacrificed so much had the taste of ashes, and his triumph was indelibly tainted by the prospects of a coming tragedy. ... ‘I am groping,’ he had written to a friend the evening before. ‘Have I led the country astray?’¹ How do we understand this person who refuses to rejoice in his own offspring? What binds him or refuses to bind him to any particular pleasure?*

While Gandhi was infusing his people with hope, and struggling hard to convince the real meaning and scope of the word ‘Swaraj,’ there was, however, one impeccable anglophile who considered Gandhi his *bête noire* contemptuously professing the nature of free India: *“Power will go to the hands of rascals, rogues, free-booters; all Indian leaders will be of low caliber & men of straw. They will fight amongst themselves for power and India will be lost in political squabbles. A day would come when even air and water would be taxed in India.”* What a terrible peroration of an anglophile! How far our trust in the tryst journeyed? Or we in the direction of that “Swaraj” that the Father of the Nation had dreamt of? Or are we collectively failing and thereby proving Churchill’s contemptuous and racist pejoratives on the great canvass of future independent India?

Gandhi returned to India on January 9, 1915 from his sojourn in South Africa. On his way back, he visited Britain for a short while. After returning back to India he went abroad only once in 1931 for the Second Round Table Conference. From 1915 till his last breath in

¹ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, © Larry Collins and Pressinter, S.A., 1975, Tarang Paper Backs (Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd), p.262-3

the assassin's bullet, his field of action was India, and his constituency was the whole people of pre-partition India. Dharmapal, one of the finest Gandhians in the independent India, who undertook to prove the statement of Gandhi on Indian education made during stay at London, at the Chatham House, in the "*The Beautiful Tree*" (1983), in one of his highly reflective moods said²: "... though Mahatma Gandhi awakened the Indian mind from its state of stupor, he was unable to put this awakening on a permanent footing. He was not able to establish a new equilibrium and a secure basis for a re-awakened Indian civilization." He continues³: "It seems that the spirit which Gandhiji had awakened in the people of India was exhausted with the achievement of Independence. Or, perhaps, those who came to power in independent India had no more use for the spirit and determination of an awakened people, and they found such awakening to be a great nuisance. As a result, the people began to revert to their earlier state of stupor, and the leaders of India, now put in control of the State machinery created by the British, began to indulge in a slave-like imitation of their British predecessors."

In fact, rejection of Gandhian ideals almost began after immediately after or even during the Second Round Table Conference. There was every effort to restrict Gandhi as the representative of the caste-Hindus which he never was. Gandhi was for a different free India, and what emerged later, in the course of time, was a fragmented Constitutional democracy with all the trappings of the colonial rule. Even Gandhians remained mute spectators to the unfolding history of ridicule and diatribe. How Gandhi looked at freedom, or equality, and many more modern categories is better explained with an anecdote⁴ in the aftermath of the Salt Satyagraha by Erik H. Erikson, the Freudian psychoanalyst, in his – **Gandhi's Truth**: "Gandhi met the Viceroy for the famous Tea Party ... the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, has described the meeting as "the most dramatic personal encounter between a Viceroy and Indian leader." When Gandhi was handed a cup of tea, he poured a bit of salt (tax-free) into it out of a small paper bag hidden in his shawl and remarked smilingly, "to remind us of the famous Boston Tea Party." ... In May 1930 Tagore wrote triumphantly to the *Manchester Guardian* that Europe had now lost her moral prestige in Asia. Weak Asia, he said, praising the Mahatma, "could now afford to lookdown on Europe where before she looked up." Gandhi, as I read him, might have said it differently: Asia could now look Europe in the eye – not more, nor less, not up to, not down

² Dharmapal, *Bharatiya Chitta, Manas and Kala* (1991 / 1993), Essential Writings of Dharmapal, Publications Division, Govt. of India, 2015, p.313

³ *ibid*, p.313-4

⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth – On Origins of Militant nonviolence*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, © 1969, pp. 447-448

on. Where man can and will do that, there, sooner or later, will be mutual recognition.” Gandhi’s idea of freedom and equality neither allowed despondency nor an unwarranted exhibition of pride, either in the victor nor in the vanquished.

For many comrades of Gandhi, he was just a common platform for the ongoing freedom movement. He was not a model to follow for the future reconstruction of India. The way Gandhi was treated was evident in the Constituent Assembly convened for drafting the Indian Constitution for the free India. He was not any more a path to social revolution. Shriman Narayan Agarwal, a forgotten Gandhian, drafted a ***Gandhian Constitution for Free India***, and as it had the nod of Gandhi, though not a stamp of approval, it was presumed, it stood for the Gandhi’s utopia. On 10 May 1948, Rajendra Prasad, the President for the Constituent Assembly wrote to B. N. Rau transmitting and explaining an article that he had received suggesting changes in the Draft Constitution. He said⁵ he was aware of the difficulties that alterations to the Draft would pose, but he hoped that something might be done. “I like the idea of making the Constitution begin with village and go up to the center;” the village “has been and will ever continue to be our unit in this country.”

But neither the village, nor the Panchayat ever found its way into the Indian Constitution except by way of Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) in 1992. It took almost 45 years post-independence for the ‘Panchayats’ to mark their presence in the Constitution and even then, without any teeth. None of the Gandhians, except some feeble voices, and none of the critics of modernity, questioned the Draft nor offered any alternatives. The reasons for ignoring Gandhi and his ideals in the course of the Constitution making was explained by Nehru⁶: the Congress had ‘*never considered*’ the Gandhian view of society (as exemplified in *Hind Swaraj*), ‘*much less adopted it.*’ ‘*Nor had Gandhi ever before asked the party to adopt his view ‘except for certain relatively minor aspects of it.*’ But it appears from an earlier letter of Gandhi⁷ to Nehru, dated 5 October 1945, that Gandhi made his stand as envisaged in *Hind Swaraj* abundantly cleared. “*Great as Gandhi’s influence had been, profound as his achievement was in putting the village and the peasant on the center of the Indian stage, he*

⁵ Prasad to B. N. Rau, Referred to in an article written by one K. S. Venkataramani and appeared in the journal *Swatantra* on 24 April 1948, as quoted in Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution – A Cornerstone of a Nation*, Oxford University Press, © 1966, p. 35

⁶ Nehru in a letter to Gandhi dated 9 October 1945, *A Bunch of Letters*, p. 509 as quoted in Austin’s *supra cit.*, p. 39

⁷ *ibid*, p.505, as quoted in Austin’s p. 39

*had not succeeded in convening either the country or his own party to his view of how Indians should live and how they should govern themselves.”*⁸

Gandhi's ideas of 'Swaraj' are not new. He articulated his political ideas more poignantly for the first time in his 1909 writing '*Hind Swaraj*' in his 'return voyage from London to South Africa in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa.' The original was in Gujarati. In his own words⁹: "I have written because I could not restrain myself." When the original in Gujarati was prohibited by the then Bombay Government, Gandhi responded to the ban with the English version. In the '**Preface**' to the English Translation, dated March 20th, 1910 he admitted¹⁰: 'it was not a literal translation but it is a faithful rendering of the original.' Another admission¹¹ was: 'The views are mine, and yet not mine.' 'Whilst the views expressed in 'Hind Swaraj' are held by me, I have but endeavored humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy.' He invoked the dialogic method of Socrates, one of the favorite personalities for Gandhi in the western philosophical tradition. In the Young India¹², after 12 years of the initial expressions, he said: 'I withdraw nothing except one word of it, and that in deference to a lady friend.' 'My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India will discard 'modern civilization', she can only gain by doing so.'¹³ The ideal of 'swaraj' canvassed in 'Hind Swaraj' was not pressed into the manifesto of the later political career¹⁴, '... today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people of India.'

In this first political work of Gandhi, his main concerns were – '*what is Swaraj?*', what is '*civilization*', '*what is True Civilization?*', '*How can India Become Free?*' The entire text revolves around these questions with occasional digressions into some connected and disconnected swaths. To the question of what is 'Swaraj' then, answers the 'Editor'¹⁵: 'It is quite possible that we do not attach the same meaning to the term. You and I and all Indians are impatient to attain *Swaraj* (self-rule), but we are certainly not decided as to what it is. To drive the English out of India is a thought heard from many mouths, but he answers in his own

⁸ Austin, *op. cit.*, p.39

⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Centenary Edition, Rajpal, Delhi, p.5

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 7

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 8

¹² Gandhi, *Young India*, January, 1921

¹³ *ibid*, p.11

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.12

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.23

way¹⁶ ‘English rule without the Englishman’? i.e., ‘the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger’? or ‘make India English’? ‘This is not the Swaraj I want.’

‘Then how can India Become Free?’ ‘*It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. ... Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream. ... But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another. Slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretension to think of freeing others.*’ ‘Whether such Swaraj ever occurred in the human history? Well! Gandhi is no serious believer in history or historicity of the west’s type. Thus, he answered¹⁷: ‘To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man. At any rate, it behoves us to try what appeals to our reason. All countries are not similarly conditioned.’ ‘*We brought the English, and we keep them.*’ ‘Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible?’ – asks the protagonist¹⁸ of the narrative.

We see all through a stream of consciousness flowing out of Gandhi around two major concepts – ‘Swaraj’ (Home-Rule) and ‘civilization.’ What the was the contemplation of Gandhi on the second one? Gandhi said¹⁹: ‘It is not a question of what I mean. Several English writers refuse to call that civilization which passes under that name. Many books have been written upon that subject. Societies have been formed to cure the nation of the evils of civilization.’ Then Gandhi, the Editor, refers to ***Edward Carpenter’s Civilization: Its Cause and Cure and other Essays***, which was a severe indictment of the modern civilization of Carpenter’s times. In this seminal work, Carpenter considered the emergence of modern science, and offers on critique of it. He challenges the loss of ethical values in modern medicine, legal profession offers his theory of exploitation. He differentiates rational and ethical science. The opening sentence²⁰, written around 1889, starts with remark that “*we find ourselves today in the midst of somewhat peculiar state of society, which we call civilization, but which even to the most optimistic among us does not seem altogether desirable.*” We can assess the influence of this work on Gandhi, with Gandhi’s view in Hind Swaraj and in his later ideas on modern medicine and legal profession. Then, what is true civilization? Gandhi said; “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 24

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 52-53

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 54

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.27

²⁰ Carpenter, Edward, ***Civilization: Its Cause and Cure and other Essays***, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1889/1916, p.1

of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms.” (Hind Swaraj, P-49). What marked the difference between the West and the Indian civilization? “The tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality.”²¹

The final question on this Independence Day @ 74 – *where is Gandhi in the post-independence Indian State?* He is not to be found in the Indian Constitution. He was almost ridiculed and discarded in the Constitution making. His thoughts were denied any space. And on the contrary several un-Gandhian features made their entry into it. The political executive has become the symbol of his ‘Seven sins.’ Finally, we retained the methods of governance, the organization of a centralized and the most powerful State, the executive and the administrative machinery, the political executive and the judiciary – all in the colonial model. Where is Gandhi, except on the rupee coins and currency notes? Where his “Swaraj” that found its roots in his idea – “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves?” In effect we made free India – “*English rule without the Englishman*”. We retained “*the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger*.” And as Gandhi prophetically called what we achieved “Englishtan” and not “Hindustan”? The ‘*Swaraj*’ which Gandhi refused to conceptually call as ‘*Swaraj*’!

Fred Dallmyr²² in “What Is Swaraj? Lessons from Gandhi” examines the question – “If *Swaraj* is identified with moral self-rule or self-restraint, why should such self-restraint be hampered or obstructed by British colonialism (or any other political regime)? If restraint is equated with internal discipline or mind control, why should internal freedom not be compatible even with external slavery (as shown in the case of Epictetus)? ...” “To disentangle some of these issues, it may be well to remember a few points from Hind Swaraj, especially Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization and politics.” “Transferred to the social and political arena, *Swaraj* translates into the self-rule of a larger community, that is, into a synonym for national democratic self-government or “home rule”. When operating on this level, popular *Swaraj* is closely linked with the idea of *Swadeshi*, a broad term designating national self-reliance, preference for homegrown products, and cultivation of indigenous (material and spiritual) resources of development.”²³

²¹ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, p.52

²² Fred Dallmyr, “What is Swaraj? Lessons from Gandhi,” in *Gandhi, Freedom and Self-Rule*, Anthony J Parel (Ed), Lexington Books, © 2000, p.108

²³ *ibid*, p.111

With post-1991 economic order, even that remote and flickering hope of any retrievable Gandhi is lost and now for the past few years, he is reduced to a poster-boy for Swatch Bharat. The nation's journey in deviating from Gandhi has already made huge strides. Where do we find Gandhi of the 'Hind Swaraj' in this blustering, violent and turbulent India on its path from untruth to absolute untruth?