



The Constitutive Concept Of Gandhian Swaraj

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Gandhi was not a conscious theoretician. His entire life symbolizes a relentless search for Truth. Truth and Non-violence are the two pillars on which his entire philosophy rests. In his constant fight against injustice and untruth, it was difficult for him to compartmentalize the social, political economic and ethical issues. Gandhi firmly believed that, “the whole gamut of man’s activities today constitute an indivisible whole. You can not divide social, economic, political and purely religious aspects into water tight compartments”.¹

‘Politics’ had a different connotation for Gandhi since his philosophy was never power oriented. Gandhi actually redefined the concept of ‘power’ as he redefined so many other related concepts, like e.g. right, democracy and showed that these concepts have a moral orientation with a valuational standpoint. **This paper aims at finding out the philosophical basis of the Gandhian concept of swaraj and tries to highlight the novel features of the Gandhian theory of swaraj. The paper does not aim at giving a detailed account of all the constitutive concepts like Swadeshi, khadi. Trusteeship etc to establish the above mentioned aim.**

Swaraj and the nationalist perspective

Politically meaningful and socially rejuvenating swaraj was an unique experiment that stood not only as a philosophical concept but a concept that had magical power over the masses in the beginning of the twentieth century. Gandhi was not the first one to introduce this term in the Indian political scene of freedom struggle. It was first used by Dadabhai Naoroji (BB366) and later popularized by LokmanyaTilak. The nationalist movements were trying to identify and highlight the distinctive features of the entire country to justify their claims for one nation. The concept of swaraj provided the nationalists with a clearly defined socio-politico-economic vocabulary under this banner. The prudent nationalist

leaders consciously preferred words like 'swaraj' and 'swadeshi' in a country where people were not united by a common bond of religion, language and culture but by the common historical memories of oppression. The emotionally loaded words like 'swaraj' and 'swadeshi' were very close to Indian psyche. Swaraj was a great leveler that could actually inspire the common people of a vast country who were not bound by the common ties of language, religion and culture.

Since the educated class of India were deeply influenced by the western models of Democracy and Parliamentary government of the British model, the moderate wing of the nationalist movement demanded an autonomous status for India within the British Raj. They thought that swaraj could be achieved through peaceful means articulated in the form of 'petition, prayer and protests'. Even one of the most militant moderate like Surendranath Banerjee preferred constitutional means to secure political rights for the Indian within the constitutional framework of the British India.

The extremists on the contrary did not want to care about the means that were to be adopted for the achievement of the desired goal, they were determined to free India from alien control at any cost. **Tilak played a major role in popularizing the concept of swaraj. Tilak interpreted 'swaraj' with an agitation against alien rule, an agitation which he actively pursued in his writings and speeches in Marathi. This ultimately culminated in the active participation in the boycott and the swadeshi movement that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, expressed repeatedly in his famous slogan, swaraj is my birth right and I will have it.** In spite of achieving this goal they realized that the dream of an independent nation is futile without the freedom from an alien rule.

For Gandhi swaraj was never conceptualized in its narrow meaning of political independence, it was a holistic concept for him which included social economic and moral dimensions apart from the political one. As he clearly declared, **"Let there be no mistake about my conception of Swaraj. It is complete independence of alien control and complete economic independence. So at one end you have political independence, at the other the economic. It has two other ends. One of them is moral and social, the corresponding end is Dharma, i.e. religion in the highest sense of the term....Let us call this the square of Swaraj, which will be out of shape if any of its angles is untrue."**²

Gandhi's concept of swaraj is an umbrella concept with four dimensions.

1. National Independence.
2. Political freedom of every individual member.
3. Economic freedom of every individual.
4. Spiritual freedom or self rule.

Emphasis on the economic self sufficiency

Spiritual freedom or the self rule is the ultimate goal of swaraj for which the first three are the stepping stones. But the economic factor must precede the political one for political independence can

never guarantee improvement of the economic condition of the general masses. The unbearable living condition of the toiling masses may continue even after a shift of power.

Gandhi was right in realizing that political independence without economic self sufficiency is meaningless. The British colonialism had completely ruined the village economy of our country as a result the entire rural force was without work. He realized that actual India is to be found in the villages and for any kind of constructive change one should focus on the improvement of the living conditions of the village population. The minimum requirement of any population is the need for food and shelter that can be achieved through availability of work for each and every individual.³ Freedom from alien rule can hardly guarantee the satisfaction of the basic requirements without which Swaraj is a vacuous concept. In 1924 Gandhi writes,—"Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen. I am not interested in freeing India merely from English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange' King log for king stork".⁴

In 1925 he reiterates the same view. He writes, "I however feel that fundamentally the disease is the same in Europe as it is in India, in spite of the fact that in the former country the people enjoy political self government. No mere transference of political power will satisfy my ambition, even though I hold such transference to be a vital necessity of Indian national life. Asian and African races are exploited for their political benefit, and they on their part, are being exploited by the ruling class or caste under the sacred name of democracy. At the root therefore the disease appears to be the same in India."⁵

Gandhi thus argued, " If we want to give these people a sense of freedom we shall have to provide them with work which they can easily do in their desolate homes. This can only be done by the spinning wheel. And when they become self reliant and are able to support themselves, we are in a position to talk to them about freedom, about the Congress party etc. Those therefore who bring them work and means of getting a crust of bread will be their deliverers and also be the people who will make them hunger for liberty."⁶

Gandhi's insight on this issue has to be appreciated. Whether Gandhi was right in emphasizing the use of the spinning wheel is a separate question that I don't want to address in this paper but one can not overlook the fact that he was thinking absolutely in the right direction, for all the cry and protests against the ruling power in whatever form were vacuous without addressing the core problem of poverty. He thus declares " The Swaraj of my dream is the poor man's Swaraj. The necessities of life should be enjoyed by you in common with those enjoyed by the princes and the moneyed men... You ought to get all the ordinary amenities of life that a rich man enjoys. I have not the slightest doubt that Swaraj is not the poorna Swaraj until these amenities are guaranteed to you under it."⁷

In the Gandhian context theory and practice are inseparable. Gandhi linked his view of swaraj with his principle of swadeshi.

Swadeshi

The term Swadeshi has a technical meaning in the Gandhian context and it must be understood from the right perspective. As has been stated by Gandhi, “Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote”.⁸ Gandhi argues that since man’s capacity to serve his environment is limited, man should always choose his immediate surroundings and select those that are immediately present before him. Thus man’s first and foremost duty would be toward’s his family, village where he actually belongs. Gandhi in his endeavor to clarify this concept reiterates that, in religion, “I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion...if I find it defective, I should serve it by purging it of it’s defects. In the domain of politics I should make use of the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proved defects. In that of economics I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbors and those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting.”⁹

The spirit of swadeshi in guiding man’s economic decisions induces him to support the local farmers to prefer the local products. It was Gandhi’s firm conviction that the breach of the sacred law of Swadeshi caused unemployment, poverty that resulted in the general degradation of the economic life of India. In an address at a missionary conference held in Madras Gandhi said, “Much of deep poverty of the masses is due to the ruinous departure from Swadeshi in the economic and the industrial life. If not an article of commerce had been brought from outside India, she should be today a land flowing with milk and honey.”¹⁰

One might argue that the above mentioned attitude is inconsistent with Gandhi’s principle of non-violence, with which Gandhi has never compromised throughout his life. Swadeshi apparently expresses an attitude of jingoism. But it would be a misunderstanding to think that the principle of Swadeshi encourages unhealthy competition and a bias towards indigenous products. Actually the principle of Swadeshi was a conscious step taken by Gandhi to revive the dying rural economy of the British India. Swadeshi certainly opposes the intervention of foreign capital, technical know-how and entrepreneurship. This principle actually encourages the best possible use of the local raw material, man power to promote occupational equilibrium. Producers on this part must have a co-operative attitude towards the poor customers. The co-operation between the consumers and the producers will lead to a downward shift of the cost curve making the essential commodities available to each and every customer.

Swadeshi as expressed through the principle of khadi

In the economic sphere the principle of swadeshi was actually expressed through the principle of khadi. The philosophy of khadi played a significant role in gandhi’s plan of economic regeneration of the poverty ridden village India.

Gandhi's plan was that every family in India's half a million villages should take part in the khadi movement through spinning or weaving. Most of the villagers were out of work throughout the year and by means of the actual implementation of the khadi movement Gandhi succeeded in developing the sense of self respect and the feeling of worth and dignity among millions of Indians. Khadi was effective instrument with both political and economic underpinnings. Gandhi confidently argued that the wheel can become universal and can replace arms provided if the million of Indians cooperate in this content- "The science of Khadi requires decentralization of production and consumption"¹¹ Whether khadi was a valid proposal for the economic development of production of India in the days when Gandhi launched this programme or whether it bears any relevance today in the economic growth of modern India is a separate issue altogether.¹² Atleast one must appreciate that his experiments with truth were actually applied at the time when India was going through a difficult phase. Gandhi was not simply a dreamer but he could show the world that he actually meant that applying his economic programmes of self sufficiency into practice with effective results. Khadi was an extremely innovative non-violent method which could elevate the masses to a sense of dignity and could empower the toiling masses to stand up against any abuse of the authority.

Gandhian view of Swaraj is in perfect harmony with his philosophy of life. In contrast to the modern civilization that treats man as a limitless consumer Gandhi highlighted the spiritual nature of man. Even though we are flooded with modern equipment's and all possible luxuries we can not deny the constant feeling of emptiness within us. Really Gandhian thought is inspiring the modern human being.

जयन्ति ते सुकृतिनो सत्यसिद्धा महात्मना ।
नास्ति तेषां यः काये जरामरणजं भयम् ॥

References:-

1. Harijan, 1920
2. The Harijan, 2.1.37. p. 374
3. Vivekananda also emphasized on this aspect.
4. Young India, 12.6.24.p.195
5. Young India, 3.9.25., P. 304
6. Arne Naess,p.176
7. Young India, 26.3.31.pp.78-79
8. M.K. Gandhi, The Gospel of Swadeshi, 1967, p.1.
9. Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p.236.
10. CWMG, Vol. 13, 1964,.222
11. Harijan 2.11.35 p 300 BDGP-279
12. The relevance of Khadi has not been dealt in this paper.