

## Re-reading *Hind Swaraj* in Contemporary Times

**Divya Rajeev**

Guest Lecture

St. Joseph's College Devagiri

Calicut, Kerala

### Abstract

In a century where globalisation and internationalism are terms that constantly formulate the political and socio-cultural discourse, what we find is the deplorable absence of an effective global morality in dealing with deeply distressing international issues. In India, we go through a period in which nationalism becomes a discourse, when the idea of a nation itself is redefined and debated. Indian cultural plurality, caste, class and religion become issues of everyday life. The sense of insecurity expressed by various sections of this country as well as the minorities in different parts of the world, immigration, the refugee crisis etc. creates a context for *Hind Swaraj* to be re-read, to see how Gandhi defined *swaraj* and freedom of expression. Interestingly this work which talks of non violence was seized in British India. John Middleton Murry, one of Gandhi's earlier critics, called it "one of the spiritual classics of the world" but many critics find his ideology impractical and irrelevant in a modern industrial society. The contemporary relevance of this text, which once challenged the ruling ideology, lies in the emphasis of some universal values and humanity that it aims to propagate.

**Key Words:** *Swaraj*, Gandhi , freedom, home rule , civilizing mission

“Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance, It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people

and to the still larger cause of humanity.”- With the clock striking the midnight hour on 14-15 August, Jawaharlal Nehru addressed Independent India. After completing more than 65 years as a democratic country, it is essential to look back and see how was Nehruvian India different from Gandhi’s Ramarajya and how *Hind Swaraj* becomes relevant in Indian political scenario.

In 1909, when the idea of nation itself was vague, Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* originally in Gujarathi on his return voyage from London to South Africa. It was written in a state of frenzy with his right hand and left hand and this was didactic in nature rather than propaganda. Interestingly it was written before Gandhi’s full time active participation in Indian Independence struggle and the earlier chapters were initially published in *Indian Opinion*. This book serves as a foundation upon which Gandhian philosophy of life is build. The text consists of twenty short chapters presented in the form of a dialogue between Gandhi who is presented as the editor and his interlocutor known as the reader.

“My life is my message”, says Gandhi and no wonder Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* also reflects his life. Mahadev Desai, the personal secretary of Mahathma Gandhi calls it as the birth of a seminal work. Gandhi talks about civilization and his idea about the Indian state. It is necessary to know the context in which Gandhi writes this. It is also significant to read it in the present context. Gandhi becomes an important figure in Indian freedom struggle only by 1915-16 and this work is influenced by his experiences in South Africa and his exposure to modernity in England. British justified colonization calling it a civilizing mission. So to talk about the core idea of civilization, what kind of civilization does they aspire for, is it acceptable or not etc were important in the discourse of freedom and nation formation. “India is being ground down, not under the English heel but under that of modern civilization”(Chapter 8, *The Condition of India*), Colonial narratives asserted that people in Indian subcontinent need protection from barbarianism, that Indian men are not capable of governance and Indian women are subjugated in the name of customs and tradition. Britishers basically presented themselves as saviors. It is this notion that Gandhi challenges. He demands home rule which basically offers individual autonomy and political freedom.

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Gandhi talks in favour of swaraj or self rule meaning internal governance, which is not just political in nature but personal as well. The contemporary relevance of thoughts expressed in the book has increased greatly in the context of humanity facing the evils of mechanisation, globalization, uncontrolled growth of capitalism, weapons of mass destruction, consumerism, materialistic development, corruption, the growing menace of terrorism, environmental degradation and so on. It has often been claimed that Gandhi is a humanist but he is not in support of any ideology that in the name of humanism, sees the world as something made for human consumption and use, disregarding the rights of other beings. He is not in favour of the concept of considering humans as world masters. The discourse of self purification is to become a mass debate and it is through that the Swaraj or home rule is to be achieved. The word attains many meanings in the discourse. Anthony J. Parel in his essay *Gandhian Freedoms and Self-rule* groups these various meanings under four headings; national independence, political freedom of the individual, economic freedom of the individual, and individual's spiritual freedom or self-rule. So the key to understanding the text does not lie in the political question of the period. It is not just a discourse between the colonizer and the colonized, the imperialist and the nationalist, but it is about two different ways of "being in the world".

India was under the influence of the British following the path of westernization and embracing all the ideals put forward by the British Raj which were believed to be progressive and it was a "civilizing mission" carried out by the British. In 1835 Macaulay expressed his idea about English education for natives so as to produce Indians following the British ideals. Now in 1909, when Gandhi was writing *Hind Swaraj*, it was such a situation in which people raised voice against oppressive British rule but adapted British ways of administration and systems. Unless India can present herself as a self sufficient country with its own ideals and governance there is no point in attaining freedom from the British, this is the basic point that *Hind Swaraj* puts forward. "You want the tiger's nature not the tiger", this kind of attitude will do no good. Gandhi states that there is no difference between the white tiger and the brown tiger in the absence of swaraj. Considering the Indian bureaucratic system, level of corruption and the rulers who are interested in vote bank politics, one is reminded of the "brown tiger" mentioned by Gandhi.

He is against all kinds of exploitation which makes him skeptical about all those institutions introduced by the British here such as railways, medicine etc as long as they serve the material needs and not the essential nature of human beings. Gandhiji was deeply influenced by Dadabhai Navraoji' s Drain Theory.

Medicine, law, politics, commerce and in fact all these walks of human activities have degenerated and the elite from all these groups are only interested in enslaving the common people to serve their interests. The institutions of political representation have turned into instruments for the self-promotion of their members. It is for this reason that in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi described the British Parliament as a 'sterile woman' and like a 'prostitute'. Like a sterile woman, the British parliament could hardly produce anything on its own. What is worse, like a prostitute it goes on changing its masters frequently. In such a system of representation, the Parliament is dominated by the political parties and they in turn are controlled by their leaders. People have hardly much role to play in the entire process except occasionally casting their votes at the time of periodic elections. It is interesting to read this taking into consideration India's present political ethics and values upheld by political parties.

Gandhi once said, there is enough for everyone's need not for anyone's greed. Hind Swaraj re-affirms this idea. He challenges the notion of modernity and the narratives of progress articulated by it. Britain was a symbol of that. Freedom from Britain not only meant political sovereignty but that should ensure the escape from the ideals that constitutes slavery and mastery. It is the unique testimony of a man who tried to translate his vision of human freedom to mass action. He is concerned about nature and opposes human tendency to exploit everything for material well being. In a context of imperialism and neo colonialism, where monopoly of some nations impose restrictions upon others and men are degraded as intellectual products in the global market, Gandhi sounds sensible. Only a handful of the elite groups succeed in grabbing the fruits of development. But millions keep on chasing their ever receding hope for the better days. And which is why Gandhi compares modern civilization like a 'mouse gnawing' while it keeps on soothing us. But according to him, it is nothing less than a Upas Tree which destroys everything around it. The way of life he puts forward does not applause competition but talks of self sufficiency and simplicity. Increasing number of

meditation centers and increasing number of depression cases, stress and lifestyle diseases seen around us compel us to question the achievements of modern civilization and why happiness is the rarest thing now.

British utilitarian ideas were more about material pleasures and bodily needs and this was something he opposed. “Wearing clothes as opposed to covering yourself merely with skin was not a sign of civilization”, and later he used his transformed semi-naked body as a political tool and it was placed as a living challenge to the notion of civilization by mighty colonial powers, charka became a symbol of power and swadeshi movement terrified the British. The core ideas of all these later developments can be traced back to *Hind Swaraj*. His concept of civilization was not based on money or power. For him civilization is that mode of conduct that points out to man his duties. For British or west, man becomes smaller and work of man becomes bigger. For Gandhi, “to observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and passion”. Basically he is talking about self control, abstinence and detachment which are connected to Christian doctrines. Being deeply religious, Gandhi’s ideals are influenced by Hindu concepts especially when he talks about duties, we are reminded of purusharthas: Dharma, Artha, kama and Moksha. When a worker is de-skilled and made to perform fragmented, repetitive tasks in a sequence of whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp, the result would be alienation and the workers would undergo the process of “reification”( term used in Karl Marx’ *Das Capital*). It concerns the way, when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought as “hands” or the “labour force”, so that, for instance, the effects of industrial closures are calculated in purely economic terms. People in a word becomes things.( Marxist Criticism, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and Cultural Theory*). When Marx was talking in terms of economic exploitation Gandhi was taking it as a moral and religious issue which marks the difference. “It is not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our heart over such things, we would become slaves and lost our moral fiber. They therefore after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet.” We can see a socialist in Gandhi, Marxist in the sense that he talks about alienation and estrangement in modern means of production. “They have a habit of writing history; they pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples. God has given us a limited mental capacity, but they usurp the function of the Godhead and

indulge in novel experiments. They write about their own researches in most laudatory terms and hypnotise us into believing them”. He supports swadeshi and views it as a way to home rule. This can be read in connection with Make in India projects introduced now, but India is no more in Gandhi’s path. When Nehru came to power, he supported modern machinery and saw it essential to improve the lives of people. Ofcourse it was science and technology which was the base of Green Revolution and white revolution. Nehru called dams as the temples of modern India. Gandhi’s ideas, though noble and elevating, are too medieval, too impractical to be relevant to the politics of a secular, industrialized society. His ideas are criticized mainly on pragmatic grounds. But his idea of education which should focus on character building finally leads to Nai Thalim which states that knowledge and work are not separate. Commodification of education has ruined the young minds. He presents a very liberal idea about Patriotism which is essentially the welfare of the people and not the state, which becomes relevant in India now where voices of dissent are considered anti national. He doesn’t promote jingoism.

The most original contribution of Hind Swaraj is its theory of non-violence. Truth and love are human nature and moral basis of human society. The aim of personal conduct and national life must be conformity with nature. Hind Swaraj “is a gospel of love in the place of hate. It replaces violence with self sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force,” In 1909 partition of Bengal was still on and movement against it was forging the nation. What Gandhi advocates is passive resistance or sathyagraha. It is surprising that later many world movements followed this path. Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela considered Gandhi as their model and even now his idea of resistance is widely discussed all over. His idea about Indian secularism was different from Nehru’s but what he says is significant in the present day situation of India where the rulers itself differentiate its citizens as belonging to majority community and minority community.

If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India.

*Hind Swaraj*

Hind Swaraj thus places before us a code of life not just for India but for the world.

According to the critics of Gandhi, this is nothing but an idealised version of an idyllic rural life which hardly existed anywhere else apart from Gandhi's own imagination. He keeps on talking of *Ramrajya* as an ideal social order and also stressed on his firm faith in the efficacy of *Ramnam*. This was nothing but bringing religion into politics with all its irrationality and blind faith. This was also an attempt to push back the human society to the medieval times when there was free intermingling of religion and politics. His notion of religion was accommodative in nature but his text sticks on many stereotypes regarding Hinduism and Islam. Situations have changed a lot all across the world and so we can no longer define any civilization as pure or impure. It is an age of cultural exchange and cross cultural relationships and India cannot be blindfolded to outside world. So it is necessary to read *Hind Swaraj* considering all these. Even then the universality of Gandhian ideals as expressed in *Hind Swaraj* is validated and significant in this age of chaos than ever before.

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