

# Hind Swaraj - Its Relevance Today

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The quintessence of Gandhi's thinking was contained in his little booklet "Hind Swaraj". Its import is so revolutionary, so different from what most of us are used to, that a real paradigm shift is a basic pre-requisite to grasping what he had in mind. As Gandhi himself explained, anyone who wants to understand Hind Swaraj has to view the world "with my eyes". That is why even close followers and admirers of his, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, just could not stomach what he had said in Hind Swaraj.

The most important thing that Gandhi conveyed through this booklet is a meaning to Swaraj which is totally removed from the political context in which we normally understand this concept. He looked at the root meaning of the word Swaraj = Swa+Raj, that is apne ooper raj. As he declared in his booklet

"Real home rule is self-rule or self-control."

In other words, for him Swaraj stood for our taking control of ourselves, freeing ourselves from the slavery to the mind and its desires. As he emphasized, the way to it is the awakening of the soul-force or love-force which frees us from the 'I'-ness of the mind. Thus, his concept of Swaraj is very different from, in many ways diametrically opposite to, the 'independence' that we celebrate on every 15th Aug. He explains this by having his imaginary "Reader" spell out the concept of independence in the political sense of the term and then goes on to give his reaction:

"You have drawn the picture well. In effect it means this: that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. .. That is not the Swaraj I want."

Later in the booklet he explains the place of the English in his concept of independent India:

“It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves... But such Swaraj has to be experienced, by each one for himself... Now you can see that it is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianized, we can accommodate them. If they wish to remain in India along with their civilization, there is no room for them.”

By ‘Indianized’ here he meant becoming Indian not in the cultural sense, but in the civilizational sense. As he put it,

” Civilization, in the real sense of the term [meaning to be civilized] consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary restriction, of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment, and increases the capacity for service.”

Therefore, he explained, “I bear no enmity towards the English but I do towards their civilization”. Once, while in England, when he was asked “What do you think of Western civilization?” he answered with a wonderful combination of brevity and humour “I think it would be a good idea”!

Thus, his Hind Swaraj is primarily a call for us to eschew the temptations that modern civilization offers us. It is based on a rejection of the value framework that forms its basis – wherein success, progress and development are measured in purely material terms. For instance, while our educational institutions teach us how to become better engineers, better doctors, better accountants etc, there is no course on how to become better human beings. This was his basic quarrel with modern civilization:

“This civilization makes note neither of morality nor of religion. Its votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion. Some even consider it to be a superstitious growth. Others put on the cloak of religion, and prate about morality. But, after twenty years’ experience, I have come to the conclusion that immorality is often taught in the name of morality... Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so.”

Here he makes the interesting and important distinction between religion as understood these days and true religion, what he terms “the religion that underlies

all religions”, which teaches us the awakening of the soul-force latent within each of us. He regards this awakening as the only way to real Swaraj, which each of us can strive towards irrespective of the political climate in which we find ourselves. It is our failure to do so that Gandhi blames for our political slavery as well:

“Our greatest enemy is not the foreigner, nor anyone else. Our enemies are we ourselves, that is, our own desires”.....”The English have not taken India, we have given it to them... They came to our country originally for purposes of trade...They had not the slightest intention at the time of establishing a kingdom...Who assisted the Company’s officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History testifies that we did all this. In order to become rich all at once we welcomed the Company’s officers with open arms.”

It is this attempt to become “rich all at once” that forms the core of modern life today, and which Gandhi regarded as the prime obstacle to real Swaraj. But he was also non-violent enough not to impose this goal on other Indians who did not share his views. As he explained in his introduction to the 1921 edition of his booklet:

“The booklet is a severe condemnation of ‘modern civilization’. It was written in 1908. My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India will discard ‘modern civilization’, she can only gain by doing so.

“ But I would warn the reader against thinking that I am today aiming at the Swaraj described therein. I know that India is not ripe for it... I am individually working for the self-rule pictured therein. But today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people of India.”

This explains why Gandhi chose Nehru as his political successor even though the latter was aghast at the wordings and message of Hind Swaraj. Gandhi knew that India was not ready for his message and vision, only for Nehru’s.

That was sixty years ago. Is the situation any different today? Is India any more ‘ripe’ to receive Gandhi’s message?

On the face of it, no. We have plunged headlong into globalization and the market-oriented economy. Even more than in Nehru's days, money and material growth and industrial production are being worshipped as the only way out of our problems. That our appreciation of Gandhi is confined to symbols is evident when, for instance, we name the biggest streets in our cities as M.G.Road, and then carry out the most ungandhian activities on it, or when we print his photos on our 500 rupee notes and then use those very notes for the most ungandhian transactions. While we may celebrate his birthday as a national holiday and praise him in our speeches and functions and newspapers, deep down we feel that in the present era of technology and modernization, rapid development and globalization, his ideas are outmoded and unsuitable for our needs. In other words, Gandhi may be a hero of our past, but has no place in our future.

And yet, simultaneously, there is also a slow awakening – at least amongst a limited circle of concerned citizens - to the wisdom contained in his ideas. This is the result of a growing realization that our present way of living is leading us headlong into disaster. Where ever development has made rapid strides, it has been accompanied by environmental problems, social stratification and stress, water scarcities, soil depletion, air pollution and traffic nightmares – Bangalore and China being two shining examples of how badly we foul our very nest which we are trying to convert into heaven through technological progress.

Gandhi had predicted all this a full hundred years ago. Interestingly, his predictions included an environmental crisis. How did he manage to do that at a time when no one had heard of words and concepts like ecology, sustainability and bio-diversity conservation? The secret lies in his awakening of the soul-force, a faculty each one of us possesses, but has not developed. It is the method by which we can rise above the concept of the 'other' and experience the world as an undivided whole. This is the route to true spirituality or religion, and it is also the route to true ecology, for then we see the interconnectedness of all the species, nay, of all living beings, with one another. Gandhi could see with his own eyes how modern science and technology was violating this supreme Law that governs the entire universe, and the consequences that will follow. That is why he insisted that to grasp the message of Hind Swaraj one has to see the world "through my eyes".

He was not, as is commonly imagined, against science and technology. On the contrary, he favoured science in its true essence – the uninhibited pursuit of truth and reality, rather than just blindly following a ‘scientific method’ that had evolved through experiments at the physical level. He predicted that a new science of the future would take into account the realities of the spiritual dimensions and the resulting technologies would be very different from what we witness today – promoting rather destroying ecology, healing the earth and its wounds, and thus having a healing touch on the human psyche too. As he put it:

“Modern science is replete with illustrations of the seemingly impossible having become possible within living memory. But the victories of physical science would be nothing against the victory of the Science of Life, which is summed up in Love which is the Law of our Being.”

But for the above vision to be translated into practice, we need to reverse the following five trends which have become necessary corollaries to our notions of what development is all about:

- Urbanization
- Heavy industrialization
- Commercialization
- Monetization
- Militarization

Unless and until we discard our attachment to the above five as necessary indicators of ‘progress’, we cannot implement Gandhi’s notion of Swaraj at a societal level. But we can still do so at the individual level.