

# Swaraj\*

The Indian independence struggle of the first half of the twentieth century took place in the name of swaraj.<sup>1</sup> ‘Swaraj’, a Hindi word, literally means ‘self-rule’. In its initial usage during the freedom struggle the word connoted the idea of rule of India by the Indians in contradistinction with rule of India by the British; and for large numbers of people this remained the predominant, if not the exclusive, meaning of the term throughout the freedom movement. But soon after its usage became current, the expression acquired layers of meanings, and almost became an embodiment of the ensemble of ideas inspiring and underlying the independence movement. The most important exposition and enrichment of the idea of swaraj was done by Mahatma Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj*. For Gandhi, replacement of British rulers by Indian Rulers, but keeping the system erected by the British intact, did not constitute swaraj. He emphasised the necessity of discarding of English institutions for attainment of swaraj. The reason was not that the institutions were developed in England, and not in India. Rather, the reason was that it was in the very nature of these institutions that they were inimical to the idea of self-rule. The English institutions were bad not only for India, but for England as well.

In making this insightful point Gandhi broke new ground by connecting the possibilities for realisation of desirable social goals with the institutional structure of the society. As the notions of independence and swaraj are intimately connected with the idea of freedom and liberty, Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* is asserting, by implication, that the goal of freedom at the societal level requires an appropriate set of social institutions. He further asserted that the traditional Indian institutions were particularly suitable from this perspective. Although during the independence struggle swaraj and *swadeshi* were intimately connected; at a purely conceptual level swaraj does not imply *swadeshi*. What swaraj requires is a set of social institutions which will be conducive to the idea of self-rule; the place of origin of the institutions being of no consequence. Gandhi’s emphatic approval of indigenous institutions, to a great extent, was because of his belief in their superiority from the perspective of self-rule.

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There is one other sense, quite distinct from the one discussed above, in which the expression 'swaraj' is used by Gandhi. Regardless of how oppressive a rule might be, to the extent an individual is willing to suffer rather than to submit to tyranny and injustice, to that extent he has attained his personal swaraj. While the notion of swaraj discussed in relation to societal organisation is collective and external in nature, this notion of swaraj, at once moral and self-sacrificial, is both personal and internal. This personal notion of swaraj is related to the idea of *satyagraha* or civil disobedience in a natural way. From a reading of *Hind Swaraj* it seems that for Gandhi the two notions of swaraj were organically linked to each other.

1. Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak was one of the first and staunchest advocates of swaraj. His statement 'Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it!' inspired millions.

## References

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