
UNIT 11

SWARAJ*

Structure

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce the students to:

- The concept of Swaraj, particularly the manner in which it was used by M.K Gandhi.
 - The unit will also establish the various dimensions of the usage of the term – political, economic, social, moral.
 - The philosophical analysis of the term will be done with respect to modern political theory, and comparisons will be made wherever required.
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11.1 INTRODUCTION

The term Swaraj/Svaraj draws on Sanskrit roots (swa/sva-self, and raj-rule), and etymologically means self-rule. The meaning of the term in popular usage has often been identified with independence from foreign rule, and the key reason for it is that the term gained wide currency during India's struggle for independence from British rule. However, the term has far deeper and more comprehensive roots than the words independence or freedom connote in the English language, and we shall discuss this in some detail in this unit.

Indian nationalists like Dayanand Saraswati, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak were some of the first political leaders to use this term, in their fight against British colonialism. Like Dayanand Saraswati, Tilak argued that this term has Vedic roots, and is part of India's ancient past. His famous words "Swaraj is my birth right, and I will have it." – marked the first phase of the nationalist discourse in India. Each of these figures had their

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contribution in formulating the usage of this term in India's quest for freedom from British rule, however, the way M.K. Gandhi articulated and deployed this term, has been unparalleled, not only in political praxis, but also political theory.

Gandhi's use of the term swaraj, not only took account of India's political quest for independence, but also focussed on breaking through the economic and social bondages that characterised India, at that time. Further, swaraj in Gandhi's view not only characterised aspects of the state at the macro level, but also the role of the individual at the micro level. Scholars have argued that Gandhi's use of the term swaraj supplanted the theory of sovereignty as part of modern western political theory, which seeks to place supreme power with the state. In Gandhi's articulation of swaraj, sovereignty ultimately rested with the civil society.

"I hope to demonstrate that real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority." (Gandhi, Young India, 29-1-25)

Gandhi presents a radical understanding of the term swaraj. Following him, thinkers and political leaders like K.C. Bhattacharya, Vinoba Bhave, J.P Narayan, etcetera have continued the tradition of reflecting on this term, which not only has relevance for the politics of the Indian subcontinent and the colonised world, but also in terms of global political theory.

11.2 MACROCOSM AND THE MICROCOSM IN RELATION THROUGH SWARAJ

As mentioned earlier, the term Swaraj etymologically, refers to self-rule. The question that immediately arises is what does this 'self' refer to? Is it the state or its people that are being referred to here? Or is it the individual self? The answer to the question encompasses all these alternatives and adds more. At the most perfunctory level, swaraj is the democratic rule of a state by its own people, which is how the term was primarily used by the earlier nationalists. Their call for Home-Rule expressed their wish for freedom from foreign rule. Figures like Tilak, distinguished between Swaraj and Suraj (good governance), which means that for them just good governance was not important, it was also a question of who was governing them.

Tilak spoke of swarājya in four ways: as the ruler and ruled belonging to the same country, race, religion; as a well governed rule of law; as a government promoting the well-being of the populace; and a government elected by and accountable to the people. Tilak's concept of swaraj largely focussed on political autonomy, although he did not discount the moral aspects

of self-control. His understanding of swaraj was highly influenced by his reading of the *Bhagvad Gitā*. However, as we have already had a glimpse, Gandhi's idea of swaraj had a radically new connotation.

The concept of swaraj, for Gandhi, works with the most basic unit of the self, however, this notion of self is not the Cartesian self, which is solipsistic, and functions only as an atomised individual. Scholars like Ramchandra Gandhi have argued that the Gandhian notion of the self draws from an advaitin understanding of reality i.e., non-duality between self and the other/s. This conception of the self believes in a dialectical relation between the individual, and the larger world and cosmos. Thus, at the most basic level swaraj refers to individual autonomy and self-control, but this would be meaningless without considering the larger interrelatedness of the microcosm and the macrocosm. Unlike the modern liberal understanding of individual rights and autonomy, which is often in conflict with that of the community or society, the individual autonomy that is being spoken of here, would be meaningful and worthwhile only when it harmonises with the good of all, and not that of the majority. The individual self is also to be guarded against any homogenisation or universalising oneness, either through the march of history or reason. The dialectical relation of the individual with their family, community, and nation is essential in establishing a plurality of voices and establishing swaraj.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of Swaraj?

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2. What, according to Tilak, are the various ways in which the idea of Swaraj can be understood?

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11.3 POLITICAL SWARAJ

As we have seen swaraj is not just a call for freedom from foreign rule or Home-rule, and was not limited in its assertion to getting rid of the British from India*. The Indian nationalists envisioned swaraj in its political dimension as self-governance, which essentially works with non-hierarchical, direct democracies, and decentralisation of power as its praxis. Such systems of governance are generally meant to minimise violence and allow a plural structure to subsist in any society. The ideal of swaraj is actually, a stateless society – each person being completely self-regulated, and yet unhindered by external control and force. This can be understood through the notion of anarchy.

Anarchy has at one level been a pejorative term, which generally indicates lack of order; however, when anarchy is considered in its philosophical essence, what it means is a lack of an externally given order. The state as conceptualised in modern western political thought – keeper of the law and order – is bypassed in this framework, as each person is regarded as a law maker unto themselves, and do not require external control by the state. Political anarchy has been discussed across the world though not with much success, and more often than not dissolved into violence and disorder wherever attempted. In this regard, the unique feature of the discussion of swaraj in the Indian context, especially by M.K. Gandhi, was the insistence on *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satya* (truth) as fundamental principles, and the deployment of the constructive programme to ensure *Poorna Swaraj* and to establish *Ramrajya*. Gandhi's ability to use terms that were already part of the Indian vocabulary and discourse, and to convey profound political principles to the masses was remarkable. The term *Ramrajya* was not meant to indicate a religion, but it was meant to indicate a state where the voice of the poorest would be taken seriously, and the rule was not by force but by truth.

The idea envisioned through political swaraj had a two-pronged approach. The first was in the form of resistance to the centralised authority of the state, and the second was in the form of political participation and a constructive approach to the political. In this context, village panchayats were seen as the most feasible form for political swaraj to exist, as they ensured decentralisation of power, and direct participation by the people in democratic and constructive processes. Gandhi's Constructive Programme (1945) is an important document to consider in this context. It lists issues of key concern with regards to the Indian society of the time and lays out a discussion of how they may be achieved. The insistence at each juncture is not a solution by political force, but a coming together of the civil society in realisation of their interdependence and mutual benefit, which is the key aspect of achieving

* Gandhi particularly saw the problem of foreign rule in terms of the rule of the modern western civilization and not the British as people. See, *Hind Swaraj*.

swaraj. The items listed in the constructive programme are not all inclusive or exhaustive and allow for amendment. In any case, the key issue was that for a polity to be built on the principle of ahimsa, a training in the constructive programme was essential, which would enable the establishment of Poorna Swaraj.

Another key aspect for the establishment of political swaraj was that of praxis, and *Satyagraha* was Gandhi's response to it. Satyagraha, generally referred to as truth-force, was developed as a special form of non-violent political action. It either took the form of civil disobedience or non-cooperation. Mainstream political theories advocate the use of force for maintaining law and order, and to defend against external aggression. Training of the civil society, in the constructive programme and satyagraha, was Gandhi's response to bring the principles of ahimsa in political practice. To be a satyagrahi required consistent practice and it was not a one of participation in protests. The theory of swaraj, in its practice of satyagraha coupled with the constructive programme, envisioned a society based on complete ahimsa that gave every individual freedom, while at the same time ensured that this freedom is borne out of their realisation of the truth of their interdependence on one another.

11.4 ECONOMIC SWARAJ

Swaraj cannot be meaningful, or for that matter even be practical, if people do not have control over their means of sustenance and livelihood. In this respect economic autonomy is paramount as far as the realisation of swaraj is concerned. It is noteworthy that Dadabhai Naoroji's critique of the British rule in India targeted their economic drain of India's wealth and resources, in his work – *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1902). The masses in India were being exploited by the British rule, and the nation was being drained of its resources for the benefit of the British empire.

With Gandhi the issue of economic autonomy is carried further to the modes of production, and a critique of industrialism. Gandhi's critique of the modern western civilisation focussed in large part on the industrial and technological mode of production that came in with the British rule. Gandhi's insistence on the use of *khadi* and the *charkha* were a response to the mechanisation of the manufacture process that not only disenfranchised local manufacturers but also forced consumption of foreign made goods. However, the most significant aspect of the critique was the alienation that it brought about in society. Several scholars looking into Gandhi's critique of the modern political economy have compared it to that of Karl Marx's critique of capitalism.

Gandhi's insistence on *swadeshi*, and the boycott of foreign made goods, was not a parochial move. It was meant to provide substance to the call of swaraj, one which would remain an abstract ideal without *swadeshi*. The insistence on spinning the charkha by each person was meant to ensure that each person engage in daily bread labour, and to uphold its dignity for each. It was also to meant to decentralise the manufacture process and promote the use of locally produced things. This is a significant aspect of realising economic swaraj, and to highlight economic interdependence between neighbouring communities. Some of these issues are only being realised now, in relation to the changing ecological balance and climate change, where insistence on local and sustainable consumption is being promoted. The overarching picture was to develop self-reliant and sustainable village communities and move people away from the clutches of alienating city life. This was not a romanticised picture of village life. Gandhi was fully aware of the squalor and poverty of Indian villages, which is precisely why he considered the practice of the constructive programme equivalent, if not more significant, to the quest for political independence of India.

11.5 SOCIAL SWARAJ

Each society or community has its own set of issues that it needs to tackle. Cultural, ethnic, religious, caste-based diversities, etcetera characterise any society, and have different responses from each society and community. While we may be able to explain the basis of the origins of these differences, a society based on swaraj is essentially a non-hierarchical society. No amount of political will, or economic equity, can root out social discriminations from a society, when the civil society plays no hand. In the case of India, the removal of untouchability and Hindu Muslim unity were recognised as essential to establishing true swaraj.

Gandhi's significant contribution to social swaraj was his ability to establish social experiments in order to address social issues, without the intervention of the state and its policies, though one may admit that he was not successful in his attempts. Nonetheless, his engagement with these issues highlights the importance of a non-hierarchical civil society, where people despite their differences can identify with a common sense of humanity and truth, through non-violent means.

The issue of Hindu Muslim unity invoked the view that all religions led to the same ultimate truth, and therefore, the view that Hindus and Muslims had completely different customs, origins, etcetera did not hold much sway. If the ultimate truth was the same for all, then the other differences could be mitigated to enable a plural society. Likewise, the malaise of

untouchability represented an unforgivable sin in Hindu society, and Gandhi considered that without exorcising it, Hindu society could never be reformed. His insistence was to enable this reform without to come from within, without state intervention, and particularly that of the British state. In both regards, he failed; nonetheless, it is significant to place his attempts in the context of the way in which we have discussed swaraj, so far.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the various dimensions of Swaraj?

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11.6 LET US SUM UP

Modern western political thought holds the individual, and their selfish interest and survival, as a fundamental assumption of their political theory. Swaraj as we have discussed it so far challenges this basic assumption. The self in swaraj is inherently constituted of the other and cannot thrive by itself. For any community or society to find true freedom living together, it must have a comprehensive conception of the individual in its relationship with others. Swaraj as a concept is not just about a democratic government, but one in which the civil society does not depend on the state for regulating every detail. In fact, the true concept of swaraj allows the establishment of institutions that enable individuals and societies to resist external control, and yet live by the law of non-violence and truth, and their common humanity.

The concept of swaraj is not limited to political thought. It is very significantly tied up with intellectual autonomy. Gandhi's critique of the modern western civilisation is fundamentally, a critique of a way of life and thought that was being spread across the world through colonialism. Philosophers like K.C. Bhattacharya tried to articulate what it would mean to have swaraj in terms of ideas that we pursue, and by way of which we recognise who we really are. The legacy of colonialism is not just about economic and political enslavement, but it is ultimately an enslaving of the mind. It is this enslavement, which was regarded as most pernicious, and therefore swaraj in ideas, which then reflects in our material reality, is what is ultimately the legacy of the pursuit of swaraj.

11.7 KEY WORDS

Ahimsa : the law of non-violence; it is meant to express not just the negative connotation of no violence, but a positive sense of compassion at all levels, for all beings, mentally and physically.

Poorna Swaraj : demand for complete sovereignty.

Swadeshi : a movement which focussed on self-reliance. It was meant to be the substantive aspect of the practice of swaraj.

11.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. The term Swaraj draws on Sanskrit roots (swa-self, and raj-rule), and etymologically means self-rule. At the most perfunctory level, swaraj is the democratic rule of a state by its own people, which is how the term was primarily used by the earlier nationalists. However, in later development, particularly with that of Gandhi it came to refer to individual autonomy

and self-control, and this autonomy would be meaningless without considering the larger interrelatedness of the microcosm and the macrocosm.

2. According to Tilak, the various ways, in which the idea of Swaraj can be understood, are, a) as the ruler and ruled belonging to the same country, race, religion; b) as a well governed rule of law; c) as a government promoting the well-being of the populace; and d) a government elected by and accountable to the people.

Check Your Progress II

1. Swaraj is a comprehensive term that covers the moral and spiritual aspects, along with the political, economic, and social dimensions. For any community or society to find true freedom living together, it must have a comprehensive conception of the individual in its relationship with others. Swaraj as a concept is not just about a democratic government, but one in which the civil society does not depend on the state for regulating every detail. It encompasses political autonomy, economic autonomy as well as social autonomy, for each individual in a society, and must be established on the principles of satya and ahimsa.