

The national liberation movement in india history essay



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A programmatic political slogan advanced by the national liberation movement in India, a slogan that called for struggle against British rule and for home rule. Originating in the early 20th century, “Swaraj” was adopted as a programmatic demand for the first time in 1906, at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, or Congress Party. In 1920 the Nagpur session of the Congress Party declared that the attainment of swaraj was the party’s fundamental aim. However, swaraj meant different things to different groups within the Congress Party. The moderates urged a struggle for limited home rule within the British Empire; the radicals, on the other hand, regarded full independence for India as the principal goal of their struggle. In 1929 the Lahore session of the Congress Party declared its task to be the achievement of “full swaraj” (purma swaraj). However, distinctions in the interpretation of swaraj persisted. Rightists in the national liberation movement understood swaraj to mean dominion status for India; leftists, such as J. Nehru and S. C. Bose, understood it to mean full independence for India. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi used the word “swaraj” to describe a stateless society in India free of foreign domination. In his book *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi was emphatic that swaraj was “much more than simply wanting (systems of) English rule without the Englishman; the tiger’s nature but not the tiger.” Gandhi was firmly convinced of the hollowness of most Western ideas. Towards the conclusion of *Hind Swaraj* he in fact proposes that ‘deportation for life to the Andamans is not enough expiation for the sin of encouraging European civilization.’ Despite this firm assertion, we have more colleges and universities teaching European civilization in the form of social sciences (including philosophy) today than ever before. We can ask the same questions Gandhi once asked of Geography, Algebra, etc. Why do

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we force millions of young people to spend their precious lives studying these so-called sciences all of which are based on untested Western assumptions of what constitutes knowledge in their spheres or are of use largely to societies from the West? His argument centered on the belief that the socio-spiritual foundations of British political, economic, bureaucratic, legal, military, and educational institutions were fundamentally unjust, exploitative and alienating. The system has remained a tool of enslavement. Good that the millions have remained aloof from it and will so remain for a hundred years more. This society of ours will only survive if it does what Gandhi recommended in Hind Swaraj: drive out Western civilization. All else, he said, would follow. As Pinto explains, “ The principal theme of Hind Swaraj is the moral inadequacy of western civilization, especially its industrialism, as the model for free India.” Gandhi was particularly critical of the deeply embedded principles of “ might is right” and “ survival of the fittest.”

On another level, the call for swaraj represents a genuine attempt to regain control of the ‘ self’ – our self-respect, self-responsibility, and capacities for self-realization – from institutions of dehumanization. As Gandhi states, “ It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.” The real goal of the freedom struggle was not only to secure political independence from Britain, but rather to gain true liberation and self-rule. A country like India, with its nested circles of social engagement – family, caste, state and nation – needs conceptions of freedom that are more flexible than the rights-based discourse that dominates our intellectual debates. I believe that the idea of swaraj is far more suitable for understanding the needs of Indians since it recognises the various demands on its use and application. Indeed, swaraj is

a fine tool with which to understand the greatest intellectual challenge that Indians have ever faced – our continuing encounter with western ideas of nature and society.

Many have given the idea of swaraj some deep thought, especially after Gandhi promoted it. J. E. Ellam expertly points out in his *Swaraj: the problem of India* (1984)-

“ In England and in other countries, the idea is widely prevalent that Swaraj, that is, Home Rule, for India is the outcome of a popular demand. Nothing could be less in harmony with the facts. Swaraj is an agitation on the part of a small section of Indians, almost entirely Hindu, representative of, or directed by, the higher castes, especially the Brahmins. It is supposed to be a progressive movement, whereas it is wholly reactionary. Statements are constantly made, both by the Swarajist press and by certain papers in England, that British rule has led to the impoverishment of our great Dependency, and that little or nothing has been, or is being, done to promote the welfare of its peoples. These statements are falsehoods of the first magnitude.” (STPOI. Pg. 11)[i]

Ellam’s object is, first to show that, centuries ago, the Aryan ancestors of the hindus arrived at a high state of civilisation; and that certain influences, developing within that civilisation, destroyed it, and so lowered the morale of its people that they fell a prey to successive waves of foreign invasion.

Following this, he gives a brief account of how the Aryans from the west, sought to develop peaceful commerce with their kinsmen of the east; and how they were impelled against their original intentions, and almost against

their will, to establish an empire. The result of this, so far from being detrimental, he proves to have been an enormous advantage to India; and he explains the difficulties which they had to encounter, and the obstacles still to be overcome, in our efforts to raise the people of India out of the state of semi-barbarism into which they had fallen. Finally, Ellam indicates the real nature of the opposition to British rule as being composed of precisely those elements which reduced the people of India to, and kept them submerged in, conditions of the grossest ignorance, poverty and superstition; and he shows that the Swaraj movement is not one of progress towards freedom and enlightenment, but the very reverse. Why it should be considered politic that the truth about India must not be told to the people of this country, he says, he has never been able to understand. But such was the attitude of our statesman and politicians until recent events rendered this policy of obscurantism impossible. Even as late as January 1930, it was stated that there was “ a tacit understanding among ministers that there ought to be silence about the position in India.” He believes that no greater disservice could be done either to India, to Great Britain, or to the Empire. Thus he determines that he would write what he believed to be the truth of the matter for the information of those who wish to be acquainted with the facts. He goes on further to describe how he felt when he arrived at the conclusions-

“ When I began the investigation that led to the conclusions at which I finally arrived, it was with an open mind. Indeed, I was prepared to sympathise with the supposed aspirations of the Swarajists. But, in the light of what I knew of Indian History, and of the teachings and practices of Hinduism, I was

speedily disillusioned when I came into personal contact with some of the leaders, and the rank and file, of the Swaraj movement.” (STPOI. Pg 12)[ii]

Another very interesting author, Dennis Dalton, illustrates in his book (collection of Gandhi’s writings) – Mahatma Gandhi: selected political writings (1996) – exactly how much thought Gandhi really gave to this idea of Swaraj. He writes-

“ That freedom which is associated with the term Swaraj in the popular mind is no doubt unattainable without not only the removal of untouchability and the promotion of heart unity between the different sections, but also without removing many other social evils that can be easily named. That inward growth, which must never stop, we have come to understand by the comprehensive term- Swaraj. And that Swaraj cannot be had so long as walls of prejudice, passion and superstition continue to stifle the growth of that stately oak” (MGSPW. Pg 127)[iii]

Dalton also includes Gandhi’s words, wherein he describes the relationship between Satyagraha and Swaraj.

“ Real Swaraj, he proclaimed, demands “ self-rule or self-control. The way to it is Satyagraha: the power of truth and love.” ” (MGSPW. Pg 11)[iv]

Gandhi wrote numerous amounts of texts. Here are some of his interpretations of the idea of Swaraj from his English weekly journal- Young India.

“ Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen .. I am not interested n freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon <https://assignbuster.com/the-national-liberation-movement-in-india-history-essay/>

freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange 'king log for king stork.'" (YI. Pg 195)[v]

" By Swaraj I mean the government of India by the consent of the people as ascertained by the largest number of the adult population, male or female, native-born or domiciled, who have contributed by manual labour to the service of the State and who have taken the trouble of having their names registered as voters. 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 it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority." (YI. Pg 41)[vi]

" Self-government means continuous effort to be independent of government control, whether it is foreign government or whether it is national." (YI. Pg 276)[vii]

" The word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which ' independence' often means." (YI. Pg 38)[viii]

" 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. But that does not mean that they should have palaces like theirs. They are not necessary for happiness. You or I would be lost in them. But 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 Poorna Swaraj until these amenities are guaranteed to you under it." (YI. Pg 46)[ix]

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How are these studies and interpretations of swaraj relevant for us today?

While it is easy to get caught up in the symptoms of our many crises (the brutal violence, the enormous inequities, the extinction of cultures and languages, the degradation of the environment), it is equally important, if not more, to understand their roots. We must creatively analyse the content and the consequences of our current economic, political, social, and educational systems, without reverting to a idealised past of untouched traditions. From these critical reflections, we must generate new spaces, systems, and processes – based on moral and holistic visions of human potential and human progress – which can lead us out of the global self-destruction which surrounds us. Throughout it all, we must consider and negotiate our own roles, while asking ourselves how we are either working for solutions or contributing to making the crisis worse. Thus, today, we recognize Gandhi's concept of swaraj as integral to three parallel action-reflection agendas for the 21st century:

Decolonization of the mind.

Critical Traditionalism
India's problems could neither be solely attributed to external forces nor could freedom emerge simply from getting rid of the British. According to Makarand Paranjape, "Decolonization is not merely the overthrow of foreign domination, but also the conservation of what is indigenous. Without the latter, the former will have little meaning or value." Rediscovering, understanding and re-valuing the 'indigenous' is critical to swaraj. Though he wished to situate India's conceptions of itself and its development in the village, Gandhi was careful not to romanticize traditional village life, nor did he advocate its rigid preservation. Gandhi was acutely
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conscious of the injustices that had evolved in the villages. He clearly envisioned his struggle against traditions such as untouchability and caste oppression as the other side of his struggle against modern imperialism. Neither could authentically be conceived of without consideration of the other.

Constructive regeneration - the way forward.