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SWARAJ: **AN ABANDONED CONCEPT IN INDEPENDENT INDIA**

SWARA POPAT

*“He was right, he knew he was right, we all knew he was right. The man who killed him knew he was right. However long the follies of the violent continue, they but prove that Gandhi was right. ‘Resist to the very end’, he said, ‘but without violence’. Of violence the world is sick. Oh, India, dare to be worthy of your Gandhi.”*¹ said the great American author Pearl S. Buck upon Gandhi’s assassination.

More than 70 years later, in a country whose freedom Gandhi fought so hard to achieve, the man who assassinated him is lionized while Gandhi and his views stand vilified. His legacy, views, and unquestionable greatness are now increasingly questioned by the people of India as it thrives under the rule of a government that stands for almost everything Gandhi stood against. “The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, cites V. D. Savarkar, a far-right Hindu supremacist who was accused of involvement in Gandhi’s assassination, in 1948, as his ideological mentor. A portrait of Savarkar, who loathed Gandhi for being too soft on minorities, hangs in the Indian Parliament building” (Mishra 2018). This essay, through the reading of *Hind Swaraj* by M.K. Gandhi and various sources from modern India, argues that the present Indian state has exterminated Gandhi’s vision of social, economic, and political development and actualized his fears of the parliamentary system being incapable of providing justice.

In Gandhi’s opinion, the foremost social and political goal for India was to establish a civic nation with a sound political community whose base unit was the individual citizen. According to him, this individual citizen must be a subject capable of self-development and self-determination or ‘*swaraj*’ and should further be the bearer of fundamental rights. On a societal level, change had to be brought about in the consciousness of the people to make independent India a civic nation and prevent conflict between new civic and old religious consciousness. Gandhi’s ideal of religious pluralism was to help build a new secular national consciousness that would ensure a spirit of nationality through minimum interference among the various religions. Religious pluralism could be incorporated by observing and understanding the difference between the concept of religion in the singular and religions in their plural sense. Religion signifies the individual’s journey towards the ultimate source of being. In contrast, religions such as “Hinduism, Islamism, Zoroastrianism” (Gandhi

¹ Malhotra, Nishi. 2015. “20 Greatest World Leaders and Thinkers Who Were Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi” *The Better India*. Accessed December 10. <https://www.thebetterindia.com/35422/20-greatest-world-leaders-and-thinkers-who-were-inspired-by-mahatma-gandhi/>

2009, 41), etc., represent the historical aspect of this quest for transcendence in the world. Both lead to the same point and must be treated with the same respect, further bringing us to the Gandhian ethic: *sarva dharma sama bhav* (Parel 1997, xvi) or equal respect for all religions. Pluralism would lead to reconciliation of the religious consciousness, developing a national consciousness that would allow Indians to look beyond their individual religions and communities and think as a unified nation. Gandhi's vision attempts to accommodate nationalism in the civic and religious sense, broadening humanity in every individual Indian. Opposing this view stood Savarkar with his concept of Hindutva, attempting to change India into a Hindu state, by any means necessary. Savarkar's ideology inspires various political groups in India today, like the "Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh" (Andersen 1972), "Bajrang Dal" (Ramachandran 2020), and the current government lead by the "Bharatiya Janta Party" (Myers 2001). It promotes sectarian division, which was considered the main threat to Indian self-government. Religious Minority lives in the country remain under constant threat with the government pursuing its ideology of one nation, one language, one religion, one constitution. The government remains of the opinion that India is a Hindu nation, and the minorities must accept Hindu supremacy. Institutions of the state which were meant to bring positive change to modern India and facilitate swaraj in its true sense, are now converted to handmaidens of the establishment enforcing the ideology which Gandhi stood so vehemently against. Minority groups share a feeling of endangerment not just on the social and political front but also on the economic, abandoned by their nation.

Swaraj, in the economic sense, was to signify complete economic freedom for the millions who toiled day and night yet failed to secure sustainable standards of living under the colonial government. Indian self-government was expected to facilitate situations where the masses, peasants, and labourers, would enjoy the benefits of an adequate lifestyle. The eradication of poverty, guaranteeing a minimum standard of living to each and every citizen of India, was considered the main goal on the economic front. As an independent nation, India was expected to adopt the Gandhian doctrine of appropriate technology, bringing into the nation modern technology that would benefit not just the rich and privileged but also the poor and destitute. Political and economic institutions were to be the mediators of a positive change incorporating western technology and adopting western values of importance such as civil liberty, gender equality, minority rights, etc. This change was to carry forward into the modernization of physical infrastructure and promote development in terms of planning, health, and hygiene of the country and its institutions. However, the nation remains a highly polarised economy with distinct divisions and millions living in situations of extreme poverty, failing to secure three square meals a day. Capital and its benefits remain in the hands of a select few while the poverty of the masses intensifies. The Indian economy is plummeting under the current leadership and remains a matter of concern. The state, which is expected to function in favour of the peasants and labourers, continually forms laws and passes bills that nullify its intended purpose. There is evident support for the predominantly wealthy and powerful, while unrest prevails among the working class. The current protests of the farmers against the

proposed economic reforms are an indicator of how the modern Indian state is constantly moving away from Gandhian ideals. The state has moved to minimize its involvement, providing large corporates direct access to the farmers hence putting them under threat of exploitation. One of the essential aspects of swaraj is questioning and attempting to abolish oppressive systems and structures of power to prevent the exploitation of Indian citizens. This is being violated as the Indian state becomes the facilitator of exploitation, the oppressive system. The Indian economy is notably shifting from a socialist model to a capitalist one. Measures such as demonetization had larger negative impacts than positive, with the middle and lower class bearing the brunt of the government's poorly planned actions. Various actions of the government evidently caused more harm to the masses. One might question, what then, are the lawmakers of modern India doing, abandoning the ideals of one of the greatest leaders in history and causing widespread discontent among their own citizens.

The question of lawmakers brings us to Gandhi and his views on the parliamentary system. His infamous critique of the British Parliament reveals his attitude towards the institution and the system. Gandhi described the British Parliament, the mother of all parliaments, as a "*sterile woman and a prostitute*" (Gandhi 2009, 29), considering it incapable of providing adequate justice. Gandhi's words though harsh, do not fall far from the truth of the current Indian Parliament. Corruption was considered to be one of the most pressing issues of the system, and the attitude of individual ministers towards their duty was questionable. Gandhi hence believed that individual leaders could best benefit the nation through their service if they had attained swaraj at a personal level. The current state of governance and conditions prevalent in modern India indicate that Gandhi's views and fears of the damage the parliamentary system could do to the Indian nation were not irrelevant. Under his defence for calling the parliament a prostitute, Gandhi stated that the parliament's power and its functions are "*buffeted about like a prostitute... Prime Ministers are known to have made the Parliament do things merely for party advantage.*" (Gandhi 2009, 31). The Indian Parliament currently witnesses a situation barely different, with a leader promoting the ideology and principles of the individual party and undermining millions who placed their trust in the government. Lack of an alternative also prevails as the inherent limitations of the parliamentary system have failed it, creating a state of politics that disempowers representation and prevents the entry of individuals who pursue the interest of the state.

As an ideology, the complete opposite of what Gandhi envisioned for India is pursued by the leaders of modern India; and citizens and their rights are in jeopardy. "*The Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic of India*" (The Constitution of India 1950) moves towards a nation with questionable socialism, secularism and democracy. An example of this is the fact that amidst a global pandemic, with millions suffering, the Indian Prime Minister was witnessed flying to Ayodhya to the disputed site of the Babri Masjid for worshipping the holy land where a temple of Lord Ram is to be constructed. This threatens the secularism of India with the very judiciary choosing a religion, not taking into consideration the voice of the people or

the rule of the majority which does not concern itself with the notion of Hindutva in its strictest sense. However, this is what the state has become and the *raison d'être* of the state as an instrument for serving the people has disappeared as it becomes a tool for spreading sectarian views. Citizens feel alienated from the state while being enslaved to it in multiple ways as the corrupting power of administrative structures influences the lives of millions. Independent India is now the modern state that has chosen to abandon the concept of *swaraj*, turning it into Indian Raj, with oppression, exploitation, and unhappiness. Modern India and its leaders stand against the views and ideas of a man they call the father of their nation. "The simple truth is that instead of diminishing in relevance, Mahatma Gandhi has actually become all the more pertinent in the 21st century" (Indian National Congress 2007). A contemporary interpretation of Gandhi's views in context of the issues of modern India, would reveal their pertinence in political, social, economic and spiritual matters even to this date.

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