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'SWADESHI': A TOOL OF ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi are clearly still of utmost relevance today. Central to Gandhi's philosophy was the principle of 'Swadeshi', which, in effect, means local self-sufficiency. This is the vision of Gandhi's vision of a free India. Maximum economic and political power - including the power to decide what could be imported into or exported from the village - would remain in the hands of the village assemblies. In this era of globalization there seems to be perpetual economic crisis, perpetual unemployment, and perpetually discontented, disgruntled human beings. The spirit of Swadeshi is not conflicting against the spirit of globalization. The principle of local economy or Swadeshi insists on minimizing the distance between the producer and consumer. Swadeshi, as conceived by Gandhi does not reject trade with other nations or communities in toto but it is opposed to an international order based solely on considerations of comparative advantage or a system that celebrates global trade for its own sake (what is euphemistically called competitiveness). If the universal manpower is neglected and concentration of power finds the hands of the few who amassed fortunes at the expense of the many, it will not be possible to banish poverty and degradation. Problems of governance today thus do not derive from national governments and cannot be addressed adequately by reforms designed merely to improve national state performance as a managerial development institution. Hence 'Swadeshi' is the only alternative left even in today's world for total socio-economic empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Empowerment, Globalization, Self-sufficiency, Swadeshi.

INTRODUCTION

Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain by it?

M.K. Gandhi

The world today is confronted with challenging prospects from the political, religious, economic and cultural spheres. The increase in political fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, economic deprivation and cultural homogenization cannot be wished away. They pose serious threats to the world at the beginning of this new millennium. Mahatma Gandhi offers an exceptionally valiant and outstanding ray of hope in such a situation. He confronted the political, religious, economic and cultural problems of his day and offers us today concrete suggestions and rays of hope. Here, scholars from different fields have come together to study the relevance of Gandhi for our world civilization. The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi were powerful enough to play a major role in the nonviolent revolution that overthrew British colonialism in India. They are clearly still of utmost relevance today. Central to Gandhi's philosophy was the principle of 'Swadeshi', which, in effect, means local self-sufficiency.

Gandhi recognised that alienation and exploitation often occur when production and consumption are divorced from their social and cultural context, and that local enterprise is a way to avoid these problems. *Swadeshi* is that spirit in us which requires us to serve our immediate neighbours before others, and to use things produced in our neighbourhood in preference to those more remote. So doing, we serve humanity to the best of our capacity. We cannot serve humanity by neglecting our neighbours.

For Gandhi, the spirit and the soul of India rested in the village communities. He said, "The true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its seven hundred thousand villages. If the villages perish, India will perish too." Swadeshi is a program for long-term survival.

Prof. Albert Einstein has said about Mahatma Gandhi, "for generation to come, people on this earth will not believe that a man like him really walked in real flesh and blood".

DEFINING 'SWADESHI'

The word *Swadeshi* derives from Sanskrit and is a *Sandhi* or conjunction of two Sanskrit words. *Swa* means Self or Own and *Desh* means Country. If the French language can be used as an analogue, the word *Swadeshi* is the adjective form of "of one's own country". The Opposite of *Swadeshi* in Sanskrit is *Videshi* or "not of ones country". Another Example of *Sandhi* or Conjunction in Sanskrit is *SwaRaj*. *Swa* is Self and *Raj* is Rule.

The *Swadeshi* movement, part of the Indian Independence movement, was a successful economic strategy to remove the British Empire from power and improve economic conditions in India through following principles of *Swadeshi* (self-sufficiency). Strategies of the *Swadeshi* movement involved boycotting British products and the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. *Swadeshi*, as a strategy, was a key focus of Mahatma Gandhi who described it as the soul of *Swaraj* (self-rule).

Mahatma Gandhi described *Swadeshi* as "a call to the consumer to be aware of the violence he is causing by supporting those industries that result in poverty, harm to workers and to humans and other creatures."

DEFINING 'ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT'

Empowerment can be understood as an activity, a condition, an event, or a process. In natural science, it unfolds according to principles that humans do not control, but in social science, empowerment is entirely the product of human decisions. Economic empowerment can also be viewed as a very complex set of institutional activities that employ public and private assets to enhance the wealth and well-being of an entire population. Its institutions span the gamut, including families, communities, firms, media, governments, political parties, NGOs, and agencies and associations of many kinds. Empowerment is a reflexive process, wherein policies, institutions, outcomes and analysis interact. It is distinct from its many objects of theory and measurement, such as economic growth. The process of empowerment cannot be reduced to any specific set of policy goals, empirical trends, or normative statements, for it includes the definition of goals, setting of priorities, choice of policies, critical reflection, debate, relationships among people who decide what trends are important, and political efforts to change the direction of policy.

What appears to be objectively true about empowerment at any moment in time is the product of debate, selection and erasure. Mainstream and dissenting opinions acquire empirical veracity as their contending forces generate and deploy appropriate data. The result is a vast literature on all varieties of empowerment, using various yardsticks. In economic empowerment, for instance, the aggregate increase in national wealth is a common measure of progress but national autonomy, food security, equity, poverty reduction, and social stability are typically important policy priorities. A state's stability, revenue, military might, and cultural legitimacy may actually preoccupy development policy practice more than economic indicators. Contending forces conditioning development jostle for influence in policy practice and use various measures of success to bolster their positions in empowerment debates.

SWADESHI VIS-À-VIS ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

More than half a century ago a practical solution to the question of poverty alleviation and total social justice was offered by a great teacher who was amongst the best of men of the past, the one who preached only that by which he lived, he is M.K. Gandhi. Gandhi's gospel of self-reliance rests on three pillars viz. *Swaraj*, *Swadeshi*, and *Sarvodaya*.

Gandhi was a champion of *Swadeshi*, which he believed was essential to *Satyagraha* and *Swaraj*. *Swadeshi* "is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote." He felt that *Swadeshi* was "a religious discipline to be undergone in utter disregard of the physical discomfort it may cause to individuals." *Swadeshi* entailed complete self-sufficiency in the political, economic and religious life of the Indian people. In following the principles of *Swadeshi*, people would utilize only indigenous political institutions, ancestral religions, and locally manufactured articles. If a person should find any of these defective, that individual "should serve it by purging it of its defects."

Gandhi believed that "the immediate problem before India is not how to run the government of the country, but how to feed and cloth ourselves." He felt that the poverty of the Indian masses was caused by the departure from *Swadeshi* under British rule. Thus, a return to *Swadeshi* was "the key to the economic salvation of India." The "cleanest and most popular form" of *Swadeshi* consisted of "introducing the spinning wheel in every household and every household spinning its own yarn." Thus Gandhi devised the *Swadeshi* vow:

"With God as my witness, I solemnly declare that from today I shall confine myself, for my personal requirements, to the use of cloth manufactured in India from Indian cotton, silk, or wool, and I shall altogether abstain from using foreign cloth, and I shall destroy all foreign cloth in my possession."

The introduction of hand-spinning and hand-weaving into the homes of Indian villages would serve as "a subsidiary occupation [for those] living on agriculture", that Gandhi believed would save the village population from starvation, advancing them ultimately towards self-sufficiency.

Swadeshi was an integral part of Gandhi's overall vision for an independent India - one in which self-sufficient, self-governing village republics were the foundation of the country. Gandhi believed that if the Indian masses followed the *Swadeshi* doctrine, "then every village of India will... be a self-supporting and self-contained unit, exchanging only such necessary commodities with other villages where they are not locally producible." Beyond the worldly implications of *Swadeshi*, Gandhi saw that the doctrine ultimately stands for "the final emancipation of the human soul from its earthly bondage... [and its identity] with the entire creation."

Since 1991, India has been pursuing macroeconomic policies of liberalization and globalization, the main costs of which have fallen on the poorest sections of society. Popular movements of resistance and the positive vision of "*gram swaraj*" are often missing.

In 1931, Jawaharlal Nehru pushed economic thought in a new direction by saying, "the great poverty and misery of the Indian People are due, not only to foreign exploitation in India but also to the economic structure of society, which the alien rulers support so that their exploitation may continue". He went on to proclaim, "In order therefore to remove this poverty and misery and to ameliorate the condition of the masses, it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present economic and social structure of society and to remove the gross inequalities."

Now let us focus into a most pertinent question as to whether the spirit of *Swadeshi* against the spirit of globalization. One cannot say this. Because there is no conflict between the two in their ultimate aims. But this must be kept in mind that one cannot become national without being local, international without being national, universal without being local and again global without being local. One cannot talk of global ethic without having a concern for the man suffering next door. Rather *Swadeshi* can reside in the global living light. Gandhi presented a picture of village India. In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending, circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But, it will be an oceanic circle, whose centre will be the individual, always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of the villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integrated units. Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and will derive its own strength from it. Gandhi admitted, "There is much that we can profitably assimilate from the West. Wisdom is no monopoly of one continent or one race." His resistance to Western civilization was, as he said, "a resistance to its indiscriminate and thoughtless imitation based on the assumption that Asiatic is fit only to copy everything that comes from the West." As a *Swadeshi* he refused to be lifted off his feet: "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all land to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's house as an interloper, a beggar or a slave."

Gandhi was a practical idealist. For him empowerment means moral empowerment. When we speak about empowerment, we think about economic empowerment, technological empowerment, social empowerment, cultural empowerment, but we never pay adequate attention to moral empowerment. Gandhi's concept of *Swadeshi* attunes to moral and economic empowerment. The contemporary development crisis is essentially a moral crisis, which cannot be overcome by measuring the increase in the GDP and the GNP. It is by measuring the degree of tolerance and searching truth in people's heart, that the development situation can be assessed. If our dream of development is to be realized, then we should be satisfied with nothing less than a global village republic founded on Truth and Tolerance.

Now let us briefly discuss the basic principles of a fundamentally non-modern "economics of ahimsa" (articulated, among others, by Gandhi, Kumarappa and Schumacher) and show how such an economics anticipates and transcends the current debates on limits to material economic empowerment, sustainability and environmental degradation through the use of concepts such as "*Swadeshi*" and "*aparigraha*".

There are several components to Gandhi's and Kumarappa's theory. I will focus mostly on the critique of "machine civilization" as inherently violent, and their concepts of *Swadeshi* or the principle of local economy and *aparigraha*, the principle of minimization of wants or simplification of material life. The Economics of Ahimsa stresses local, decentralized community economies and economies of needs rather than wants. By de-emphasizing production for sake of production, consumption for sake of consumption or growth for sake of growth, it also tackles the thorny issue of how to achieve a basic material level of comfort for all without compromising the viability of future generations, or what has come to be called "sustainable development". Here arises the problem of equitable distribution. In an economy where production occurs purely for use, the problem of how to distribute does not arise because the producers of a good or a service are themselves the users. A completely materially self-sufficient individual or even family is a rarity and most societies have some form of exchange, which in return distances the producer from the consumer. The principle of local economy or *Swadeshi* insists on minimizing this distance. Local economies have been discussed extensively as alternatives to globalization. For Gandhi, *Swadeshi* is a response to the capitalist global economy that results in colonialism and imperialism. As Lenin made famous in his pamphlet on Imperialism, the endless search for cheap raw materials, cheap labour and newer markets for manufactured goods is a prime cause for wars under capitalism. The link between wars and environmental degradation can easily be imagined. By *Swadeshi* one can avoid the violence that accompanies international trade. The *Swadeshi* theory of trade is radically different from trade theories in neoclassical economics. The most famous one being the theory of comparative advantage which emphasizes mutual gains from trade purely in terms of greater consumption. Thus the neoclassical motto is "some trade is better than no trade". While the *Swadeshi* motto is "no trade is better than exploitative trade". The doctrine of *Swadeshi* recognizes that the value of a good or service cannot be reduced to its price but that human and environmental conditions involved in its manufacture matter as much if not more. Anticipating the days of consumer awareness and local currency, Kumarappa had the following list of questions ready for all consumers: "What does one know about where the article comes from? Who makes the article? By what material? Under what conditions do the workers live and work? What proportion of the final price do they get as wages? How is the rest of the money distributed?" As can be seen, these questions are easier to answer for participants of an economy that produces mainly for the local market. Kumarappa explains the moral basis of *Swadeshi* as follows. "Those of us who apply human standards of value (to production) have to inquire into all aspects of manufacture. It is an arduous task and it becomes almost impossible for ordinary persons to undertake it when the articles come from far off countries."

There are two common objections to *swadeshi*. First, it has sometimes been (mis) interpreted as an insistence on complete economic self-sufficiency for a nation or a community. *Swadeshi*, as conceived by Gandhi does not reject trade with other nations or communities in toto but it is opposed to an international order based solely on considerations of comparative advantage or a system that celebrates global trade for its own sake or for the sake of profit maximization (what is euphemistically called competitiveness). Second, like in Marxist economics, the principle of non-exploitation is part of the Economics of Ahimsa and it entails

that the product of a worker's labour is not appropriated by a capitalist or a landlord who has done nothing to produce it, but retained by the worker herself. Thus *Swadeshi* is not simply capitalism with local capitalists instead of global ones but also calls for a change in the way in which production is socially organized. Even if the will is present, serious questions still remain as to how a *Swadeshi* economy can survive in today's globalized world. With the information and communications revolution of the 1990s and the relentless expansion of the neo-liberal model of economic organization, arguing for a *Swadeshi* economy in 2006 seems anachronistic, even ridiculous. Nevertheless, interesting experiments are being carried out in local economy management and they serve as models for more such efforts. Some of us may be aware of the work being done on various aspects of local economy by folks at the Schumacher Society. I will also briefly mention one such experiment being carried out in southern India, under the leadership of Rangaswamy Elango, in the town of Kuthambakkam. Elango is working on establishing a land/agriculture-based local economy, along the lines of the Gandhi-Kumarappa model. By bringing together six neighbouring villages into a cluster, many products that are consumed by the villagers can be produced locally. Elango estimated, through a detailed door-to-door survey by his team, that 5/6 of the commodities that Kuthambakkam consumes every month could be produced within the village and traded locally. While experiments such as Elango's are by far the exception rather than the norm, they can still be an inspiration for anyone wishing to create alternatives.

Now the Government has been introducing schemes of industrializing the country for the maximum utilization of her raw materials, not of her abundant and unused man-power which is left to (take care of itself as best as it can). Can such schemes be considered *Swadeshi*? Gandhiji heartily endorsed to proposition that any plan, which exploited the raw materials of a country and neglected the potentially more powerful manpower, was lopsided and could never tend to establish human equality.

America is the most industrialized country in the world and yet it could not banish poverty and degradation. That was because it neglected the universal manpower and concentrated power in the hands of the few who amassed fortunes at the expense of the many. The result was that its industrialization had become a menace to its own poor and to the rest of the world.

If India was to escape such disaster, it had to imitate what was best in America and the other Western countries and leave aside its attractive looking but destructive economic policies. Therefore, real planning consisted in the best utilization of the whole manpower of India and the distribution of the raw products of India in her numerous villages instead of sending them outside and rebuying finished articles at fabulous prices.

The development of India's electronic and technological infrastructure is another area of interest because it developed largely separate from the world markets. The early days of independence were dominated by the Gandhian concept known as "*Swadeshi*". During the independence movement, self-sufficiency in the homespun cotton industry was largely responsible for making the continuance of India in the British Empire uneconomical. These economic pressures persuaded Britain to grant autonomy. The concept of self-sufficiency acquired a socialistic colour after independence. Nehru was using the Soviet Union as a model for industrial development. This allowed India to develop an indigenous electronics industry that was unconnected to the world markets. Although this industry was never able to come up to world standards, it did create an environment in which indigenous approaches could be developed for purely Indian needs.

I believe that every civilization has its own innate genius. We are committed to *Swadeshi*, the philosophy of India and to the path of self-reliance. *Swadeshi* means faith in indigenous institutions and a strong belief that the future of India must be secured by Indians themselves. India's goal of achieving a double-digit annual GDP growth rate on a sustainable basis can be achieved principally by mobilizing our own domestic resources. A strong, efficient and high-growth Indian economy, in which Indian products, services and entrepreneurs dominate the domestic and global markets, is our concept of *Swadeshi*. This can be achieved by making Indian products and services competitive on both cost and quality.

MAHATMA –THE PIONEER

Gandhi was opposed to large-scale industrialisation, and favoured small local industries instead. In this way there would be a certainty that each individual would be gainfully employed and able to live a self-sufficient fulfilled life. This local self-sufficiency he called *Swadeshi*. It means buy local, be proud of local, support local, uphold and live local. It was based on the theory of decentralised local interdependence and universal employment. When we buy or sell something outside our area then we are depriving a local person of his or her livelihood.

Mahatma Gandhi was a champion of '*Swadeshi*', or home economy. People outside India know of Gandhi's campaigns to end British colonialism, but this was only a small part of his struggle. The greater part of Gandhi's work was to renew India's vitality and regenerate its culture. Gandhi was not interested simply in exchanging rule by white sahibs for rule by brown sahibs; he wanted the government to surrender much of its power to local villages.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary development regimes inhabit histories they do not control. They operate among forces and tendencies that do not form one dominant trend. Globalisation, regionalism, and localisation are all progressing at the same time. In this context, the use of national statistics to measure the progress of development is not only inadequate but also deceptive, because national territories no longer comprise the spatial domain of development. No other territorial domain has come into existence.

Problems of governance today thus do not derive from national governments and cannot be addressed adequately by reforms designed merely to improve national state performance as a managerial development institution. Weakness is a now a prominent feature of development, locked in place by forces operating inside and outside national territories. Experts and disciplinarians who work earnestly to enforce rules and norms of the global regime in national states are actually part of the problem: they participate unwittingly in struggles and negotiations they do not see, over control over the development process yet claiming to be dispassionate purveyors of universal truths about trajectories of human progress.

Who is leading development, who is benefiting, and where today's trends are moving remain debatable. Some say development is dead. It is more accurate to say that development has entered a confusing phase of flux and uncertainty, wherein increasingly numerous, vocal, and contentious participants organise to pursue disparate, sometimes contradictory goals, including free market globalisation, economic growth, gender justice, ending poverty, and empowering the poor majority of citizens who have never yet had their own effective institutional voice.

So Gandhi offers Indians a utopia. The indomitable will of the Indians, depicted and captured by the charisma of Gandhi, is still nurtured by the long-forgotten vision of Gandhi. His utopia will always motivate the millions of (even illiterate) Indians. He awakens even today a sense of wonder; Gandhi's life both transparent and enigmatic fills all corners or niches of the Indian life with an awareness of mystery. Gandhi's vision helps to validate the Indian social order. As a person Gandhi gives us some general guidelines to conduct ourselves during the stages of India's growing political process. Further, the vision of Gandhi enables us to live the reality of the contradictions that is India and to be enriched by it. These factors make Gandhi a myth - a modern myth for the millennium!

"Growth with a human face" is the need of the time, especially for India where majority of people live in the villages and live under the threat of poverty. Poverty erodes the foundation of democracy. It is not the one time hand out that eradicates poverty but gainful employment, 'as they are where they are'; situational development with local prosperity is the economic salvation of the nation. KVIC with its pioneering surge in this area is now playing a prominent role, setting example for corporate philosophy for developing the rural economy, which is the backbone of the nation.

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