

## From Swaraj to New India: Understanding the Swa of Modi's New India

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### ABSTRACT

*After 75 years of political swaraj that has seen uninterruptedly caste, class, religious-communal, and regional divisions, conflicts, fragmentation, the stubbornness of poverty, and enfeeblement of the nation, we now hear debates related to the creation of a New India under Modi dispensation driven by cultural nationalism. Just as colonial conditions gave rise to certain kinds of imaginations of the Swa, the crisis produced by post-colonial rule under the epistemic dominance of 'post-colonialism' and globalization has spawned new imaginaries of India's self. This paper examines the nature of the Swa, the meaning of the collective self of the New India imagined in cultural nationalism while drawing upon the homology with older Indic ideas and moral foundation, and the imaginaries of the nation. The swa of New India draws upon the RSS-BJP understanding of India's history, civilization, and post-independence experience, which is so divergent from the Nehruvian Congress. The swa of New India celebrates Hindu ethos and aspires for technological modernity with rootedness in Indian/Hindu-spiritual heritage*

**Keywords:** Swaraj, Cultural-nationalism, Indic knowledge tradition, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, New India, Modi

### INTRODUCTION

Colonial conditions, including epistemic, not only brought misery but also colonized minds. But not all minds were colonized. West's epistemic arrogance was rejected by Vivekanand, Aurobindo, Tilak, Gandhi, Tagore, and many others. Undoubtedly, the struggle for freedom was influenced by ideas within the Western episteme – the values of liberty, equality, etc, but there were other indigenous influences as well (Bayly, 2001). Freedom struggle acquired a native-vernacular mass connect when intellectuals-leaders tapped into our Indic philosophical and ideational resource and a whole range of concepts, norms, and imaginations – *Nyaya, dand, Niti, raj dharma, sasana, anrsamsya, artha, atman, dharma, swaraj, swadeshi, satyagraha, Azadi*, Hindutva, etc for national regeneration and swaraj. The struggle for Swaraj also generated meditations and reflections on the Swa of the Swaraj. Who are we as a collective, as a nation, what do we stand for and what is the future we imagine? Various meditations on the collective- swa, yielded different conceptions of 'what is India'. For instance, as Vajpeyi (2012) posits, in Gandhi, India's self would be characterized by relations of ahimsa, in Nehru, it would be pivoted on *dharma* and *artha*, in Ambedkar it was dukkha to be jettisoned, and in Tagore India's self had a *virha* for the past community from which it had been sundered.

After 75 years of political swaraj that has seen uninterruptedly caste, class, religious-communal, and regional divisions, conflicts, fragmentation, the stubbornness of poverty, and enfeeblement of the nation, a new imagination of India/Bharat has emerged on the national firmament, expressed in ideational coinages such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, New India, etc. We are once again, after 'secular republicanism' has dissipated,

at an inflection point defining ourselves- the collective self -our swa, and seeking the meaning of our Swa in the Amrit Kaal.

The paper attempts to explore the Swa of New India, as after the demise of the Nehruvian consensus, now widely accepted, its alternative is not fully clear. This study intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on re-imagining India. This debate is important to study because it is deeply engaged in the politics of culture by which Modi-BJP came to power. Its sustenance in power and legitimacy of power requires cultural politics. This paper posits that BJP's politics to distinguish itself from the Congress politics employed the trope of cultural nationalism to frame its political narrative. And further, if the above is correct then this paper further posits that just as Swaraj was a response to the challenges and unmet aspirations of the people under colonial conditions, the imaginary of Modi's New India is a response to the challenges and unmet aspirations of 'post-colonial' conditions, for which the Nehruvian mould of thinking and framework of governance was responsible.

### **METHODOLOGY**

It is a normative desk work based on critical appreciation of the literature available on the modern Indian political thought of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the literature on cultural nationalism , India's democratic -developmental experience, and the public policies of the Modi government.

### **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

The paper has three sections. The first section examines the conception of Swa and Swaraj in Swami Vivekanand, Sri Aurobindo, and Gandhi. The struggle for the Swaraj is related to the awakening of the Swa, for self-realization or spiritual freedom based on the understanding of Vedanta. the quest for self-liberation, overlaps with the anti-colonial struggle, and cultural regeneration. The second section deals with the eclipse of the spiritual/cultural dimension of the nation, and the marginalization of the Swaraj discourse after political independence under the West-inspired 'secular republicanism'. The third section deals with Modi's vision of a New India which honours and takes pride in the civilizational/cultural heritage and has the confidence in its people of creative innovations in material and technological domains to create a socially cohesive, Hindu-centric, culturally confident, materially affluent, militarily powerful nation-state, and acknowledged by the world for its material accomplishments as much as for being the spiritual leader of humanity.

#### **Swaraj and the Swa in Vivekanand, Aurobindo, Gandhi**

The term swaraj has two roots- Swa and Rajya. Swa means 'of the self', or 'having reference to the self', Rajya means 'rule', or 'mastery'. Swaraj has two meanings: 'rule by the self' and 'rule over the self (Vajpeyi, 2012). In the historical context, 'Rule by the Self' meant self-government and political independence. 'Rule over self' would refer to the internal dimension of freedom – 'the freedom of the soul' or, 'one who is governed only by the dictates of his soul' (Sen, 2017). In a sense, the two meanings of swaraj expressed two interrelated dimensions of freedom -the external and the internal respectively. For Vivekanand spiritual

awakening is a pre-condition for political swaraj. 'A successful anti-colonial upsurge then required deeper changes in the way people thought or rather', how they 'had been taught to think' (Sen, 2017). Vivekanand observed that 'Colonial rule had hypnotised the Indian mind and taken away all vestiges of dignity and self-belief. The mind therefore had to be de-colonised first before it could be made more responsive to freedom' (Sen, 2017). Where political freedom preceded spiritual freedom, it would remain in-substantive and insecure. Aurobindo's Swaraj was in and through nationalism, wherein the nation was a religious/spiritual entity (Dalton, 1982). In Aurobindo, swaraj meant, as for Tilak, 'full independence from British rule and, in particular from the *Firinghi* mentality' (Dalton, 1982).

Swaraj, thus, meant a psychological liberation from all Western influence as well as the attainment of political independence. But unlike Tilak, Aurobindo's swaraj went beyond the political conception of swaraj, as he developed it into a philosophy of freedom distinguishable from the 'European idea of political liberty' (Dalton, 1982), which was negative. Political liberty was the absence of restraint, but Aurobindo's swaraj was freedom emerging from self-regulation, self-restraint, and self-dependence, where the self finds unison with the universal. True Swaraj for India would be the 'resumption by (India) of her great role of teacher and guide', and 'self-liberation of the people for the final fulfilment of the Vedantic ideal in politics' (Dalton, 1982). Gandhi's swaraj was a carryforward of Vivekanand and Aurobindo's ideas of freedom, clearly recognizing the internal and external dimensions of freedom. Gandhi's Swaraj had three pillars: 'Hindu- Muslim unity, the abolition of untouchability and the uplift of India's villages', which he hoped would be realized through the Constructive Programme (Dalton, 1982). Such swaraj for him would be 'organic swaraj' in the sense that freedom would be with social harmony, characterized by 'hearty unity' (Dalton, 1982).

The struggle for swaraj ( Political freedom) had also ignited debate and explorations into the questions about the nature of the 'swa' - 'who are we -and also the nature of swaraj we would want. In a sense the debate on 'Swa' among the leaders of the colonial times was a symptom of the crisis of selfhood. As Ananya Vajpeyi points out, following McIntyre, the crisis of self was related to a crisis in tradition (Vajpeyi, 2012, p. xiv). The rout of Indian traditions of thinking about "the political" was so complete that at one stage India's nationalist elite comprised men, who were 'schooled purely in Western political thought' (Vajpeyi, 2012, p. xv). These 'brown sahibs' were so estranged from Indian tradition that they were indistinguishable from liberals, conservatives, socialists, and Marxists of the Anglo-Saxon world (Vajpeyi, 2012, p. xvi).

Many, however, overcame the influence of colonial-western episteme and realized that although Indian traditions had weakened, they were still the repository of many norms, values, and aesthetic resources for Indian people. Vivekanand, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Tagore dug into India's past knowledge/cultural resources in search of the sources of the self, and understanding of its nature.

Swami Vivekananda, who was, in the words of Makarand Paranjape (2013), the first 'national figure' of India, drew upon Vedas and the Vedanta for understanding India's Swa, and establishment of swaraj.

Vivekanand saw India's Swa as weakened and crestfallen during the colonial period due to its long neglect of material growth, aloofness from the world and internal social divisions. Though ignorance and pernicious socio-religious practices crippled her, Vivekanand believed that she could regenerate herself through self-effort, transformations in practices, and by following the Vedanta principles. In Vivekanand, the 'Swa', situated in an ancient civilization, is deeply spiritual, tolerant, accommodating of diversity /plurality, and capable of giving light/wisdom through its Yoga and philosophies of life. Makarand Paranjape sees Vivekanand as the creator of a New India- the visionary who gave the whole people the Maha-mantra of Swaraj (Paranjape, 2013, p. 150).

Similarly, Aurobindo conceived the essence of India's swa in a spiritual sense. A fallen Indian people would win Swaraj through nationalism. His meditations on 'swa' can be found in his writings on the theme of Renaissance in India. Aurobindo's imagination of the swa and swaraj was one of a spiritually evolved, materially affluent renascent India, wherein people have a diviner life, full of joy and creativity.

Gandhi's meditations on India's self and India's sovereignty are found in Hind Swaraj. Gandhi's Swa is anchored in *Sanatani* and Indic values of *satya*, and *ahimsa*. Gandhi would frequently switch registers between the ideas of individual and collective selfhood. This implied swaraj at the collective level needed individuals with 'self-mastery'. From Gita, he got his category 'Ashima- self's orientation towards 'others' - devoid of the intent to harm. Ahimsa and swaraj are central categories in Gandhi's thought, and these two categories also played a significant role in post-1919 struggles, and in India's political modernity. Swaraj resonates with Indic spiritual categories, such as *moksha*, *Mukti*, and *Nirvana*. *Ahimsa* recalls and reinforces *karuna*, *daya*, *anrsamsya*, *Abhaya*, and *brahmacharya*- all these categories are ' basics of life lived in accordance with virtuous normativity (Dharma)' (Vajpeyi, 2012, p. 51). These virtues are meant to produce harmony between self and other, material existence and moral life, and contribute to the general social betterment and moksha. Gandhi believed that if one cultivated these virtues, it would be a conduct towards Sarvodaya and Swaraj. In Gandhi, swaraj also has a cognate concept of Swadeshi. It implies economic self-reliance and a preference for indigenous over foreign goods. It also connotes reliance on one's own, all that is proper to it, self-mastery, and sovereign self-hood Gandhi's swaraj, needless to say, inheres swadeshi (Vajpeyi, 2012, p. 52).

These conceptions of Swa and Swaraj have strong spiritual selfhood grounded in the Indic philosophies. Remarkably, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Gandhi brought the spiritual, the metaphysical, and the political within a single conceptual domain. In the development of this discourse, the contribution of British orientalists such as William Jones, H.T Colebrooke, Charles Wilkins, H.H Wilson, and James Prinsep need to be acknowledged in so far as they led to the discovery of the Indian knowledge traditions and helped Indian ' find an Indigenous identity in the modern world without which, the discourse on modern Indian political thought would not have flourished (Kopf, 1980). The indirect, generally negative role of the Anglicists, represented by Macaulay, Charles Grant, and James Mill, among others, also needs to be noted for the challenge they threw to the Indians by denigrating Indian knowledge and cultural traditions,

compelling Indian intellectuals to articulate and defend, elaborate and celebrate their past, in material, cultural, spiritual spheres.

### **Political independence and colonization of Imagination**

This Indic thought and spiritual tradition, which remained an important stay behind the anti-colonial struggle and in the rise of nationalism in India, and which had animated two streams of nationalist activism- the Hindu nationalist and Hindu traditionalists, however, got sidelined by the 1930s by Macaulay's progenies. Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj* about the possibility of Europeanized Indians – the products of Macaulay's school getting power, and in that event, we may have political independence, but no *Swaraj*.

After independence in 1947, cultural nationalists lament that the leadership of the country/ nation indeed fell into the hands of Macaulay's children. Sita Ram Goel averred that Macaulayism, Islam, and Christianity posed a threat to Hindu Society (Jaffrelot, 1996). Deendayal Upadhyaya noted the growing influence of Western ideals and ways of life. Those who came to dominate public institutions, policy-making, and fashion development strategy were the left-liberals imbibing Western enlightenment values (Majumdar, 1970). In the name of modernity, we neglected our culture and cultural heritage. Thakur (2010) states that the disciplines born on the soil of Europe became synonyms of the knowledge system in our universities. As Sinha (2016, p. 41) writes, 'We failed to contextualize our traditions and intellectual legacies' in political discourse, social sciences, literature, and philosophy. The Nehruvian leadership reconstruction of the nation's Self under the rubric of 'state and nation building' was thus neither anchored in India's cultural civilization nor could it convince the masses and receive their involvement.

By the 1980s, as the 'organic crisis of the Indian state' manifested in myriad caste, class, and communal conflicts as well as secessionist movements, the Nehruvian nationalism began to wear down, and cultural nationalism started capturing people's imagination (Bose, 1997) (Corbridge, 2000). According to Ashish Nandy, post-independent Congress politics and leadership failed to draw upon Indic cultural traditions to deal with the crisis. This was particularly true concerning the crisis of secularism in India. In this context, Ashish Nandy noted the imperialism of categories in the conceptual domain (Nandy, 1988). Secondly, in a related way, the implicit 'imperialism of categories' in the Western imitative development model spawned a crisis. In the political field, a gnawing gap had developed between the spheres of the Westernized middle class/elites from which the leadership in polity came and the discourse of the subaltern classes (Corbridge, 2000). As Stuart and Harris (2000, p. 183) point out, the masses had become disenchanted with imitative projects of modernization and nation-building since 1947. They were, therefore, susceptible to the assertions of cultural nationalism that promised a better future, respected and valorized their culture, and sought their participation in recovering the lost nation.

### **The Swa of 'New India'**

Post-2014 a new leaf has turned in the nation's life under the influence of Cultural nationalism.-As the Hindu identity of India and Hindu nationalism had been run down since Nehru (Dasgupta, 2019), Modi appeared at the forefront against 'national self-flagellation'. 'A common thread running through nationalist thought till

the 1920s' was the belief in the centrality of a unified Hindu identity in the framework of nationhood' (Dasgupta, 2019). It took recourse to religion- bhakti, puranic traditions (Bankim), Vedanta (Vivekanand), and Veda (Dayanand)- in developing a unified Hindu identity The old tradition of Hindu-identity centric nationalism that secularist nationalism had displaced was being resurrected. As Swapan Dasgupta writes, the quest for New India invariably involves the discovery of Old India (Dasgupta, 2019).

Modi's leadership has talked about making a New India. The ideological doctrine of New India vision has three features: (1) 'a nation driven by innovation, hard work, and creativity', (2) a 'nation characterized by peace, unity, and brotherhood, and' (3) 'a country free from corruption, terrorism, and black money and dirt', and it seeks citizens' participation through eight pledges (Ahmed, 2022). The New India envisions a Swa that has homology with the thoughts of Vivekanand, Aurobindo and Gandhi for Swaraj, Swadeshi, and spiritual leadership of humanity (Vishwa Guru). Since 2014 Modi's government has introduced a slew of programmes and policies. These programmes are in all fields- social welfare, economy, agriculture, industry, administration, technology, foreign affairs, education, health and sanitation, and poverty alleviation. Initiatives such as JAM Trinity, housing for all, electricity to every home, work to every hand, education to all, universal health facilities and Swatch Bharat, Make in India, Atamnirbhar Bharat, Digital India, Startup India, Standup India, Beto Bachao, Beto Padhao are all steps in building 'New India'. Ram temple at Ayodhya and, the modernization of Kasi Vishwanath Dham, Namo Gangae have been steps for cultural awakening and identity. The forgotten pre-independence dreams are now being revived and adapted.

Modi, in 2019, added 'Sabka Vishwas' to his earlier 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' mantra for New India (Business Standard, 2019). The new addition was directed towards the minorities to gain their trust. The perception of Muslims as threatening 'other' and Hindu vulnerability had changed. In September 2018, Mohan Bhagwat, speaking at Vigyan Bhawan, reiterated that Hindutva is inclusive and does not exclude Muslims for the day Hindutva excludes Muslims, it would no longer be Hindutva, as it believes in *Vasudhava Kutumbakam* (Express Web Desk, 2018). In the context of Golwalkar treating the Muslims as second-class citizens bereft of all citizenship rights, Bhagwat said that not all of Golwalkar's thoughts, particularly the 'Bunch of Thoughts' were eternally valid (Express Web Desk, 2018). Bhagwat's articulation implies that though the Swa of the New India in cultural nationalism, continues to be Hindu-centric, it does not exclude Muslims as a threatening other.

Cultural nationalism emphasizes the consciousness of corporate identity as necessary for national achievements. Upadhyaya wrote, 'Without this identity, there is no meaning of independence, nor can independence become the instrument of progress and happiness. As long as we are unaware of our national identity, we cannot recognize or develop all our potentialities' (Upadhyaya, 2009). He lamented this neglect as early as the mid-1960s and underlined the importance of internalizing national identity for Indians.

The 'core national identity is best encapsulated in the self-definition/ description of Bhartiya. The consciousness of *Bhartiyata* is a consciousness of Indianness. Indianness means a realization 'that we are children of this soil and must have allegiance to this land, we belong to the same society, our ancestors are common', and 'our aspirations are common' (Madhav, 2021). For a long, this identity lay in comatose. Modi's New India seeks to bring to life this identity. This identity encompasses the awareness of India being the oldest, richest continuing civilization, whose contribution to philosophy culture, science, and technology is unparalleled. The Anglicists in the past, would not acknowledge this. Rather they would compare India's period of civilizational decline with the period of European Enlightenment and boast over their superiority. They, however, could neither completely elide Indian knowledge/culture nor succeed in any remarkable way in their proselytizing mission in colonial India. This awareness of India as a civilizational nation has brought a new orientation to imagining a new Swa/Self.

Under Modi's regime, India's economic, and technological development has been spectacular. The contemporary world takes note of these achievements as is evident from the growth of influence of India's foreign policy. India still has a long way to go before it becomes a developed country. It must innovate, invent, create, discover and mark ahead in material production so that the quality of life of Indian people reaches the level of the materially advanced countries. Modi's New India, then, must orient and seek a blend of economic and 'technological modernity with the country's Hindu inheritance' (Dasgupta, 2019). Makarand Paranjape captured a sense of this orientation of the Swa when while speaking at the Jaipur Literature Festival, he noted New India combining '*Ashmita Jagran*' – the self-renewal of civilization- with a modernizing and developmental agenda

Further, Modi's New India intends to be counted as a major power influencing world affairs. In the conventional realist paradigm of international relations, the source of influence is the hard power of economic and military strength. India's economic growth and rising military power have surely given her influence. It is, however, the soft power influence, based on being a natural spiritual leader of humanity, as Vivekanand spoke of India's special genius, which it is seeking. In a conflict-ridden world, India offers a unique perspective of dealing with conflict by focusing on conflict avoidance mechanism, which Vivekanand suggested to the World Parliament of Religion in 1893, namely to 'avoid conflict before they arise and not attempt to resolve them after allowing them to manifest' (Gurumurthy, 2018, p. 14). The ancient way of conflict avoidance was '*Samvad*' a "model of dialogue" called '*Purva Paksha*' given in the Indian Tarka Sastra (Gurumurthy, 2018, p. 14). In the imagination of the cultural nationalists 'New India' is also being imagined as a Vishwa Guru.

Modi's New India is a vision of self-reliant India. It is a vision of socially cohesive, materially affluent, culturally confident, historically conscious, and technologically advanced modern India. it is a vision of India that imagines India realizing its genius and fulfilling its mission of being the spiritual leader of humanity. Such a vision aligns well with the Swaraj of Vivekanand, Aurobindo, and Gandhi. Modi's New India brings in cultural and spiritual nationalism in national politics for the first time.

Modi's New India differs from the previous Nehruvian vision in that the earlier vision of India was founded on the West-inspired vision of socialism and secular republicanism, seeking to bind the nation by constitutional patriotism and morality only. Modi's New India, on the other hand, is imagined based on Integral humanism and Hindu national ethos. It reconnects its imagination with the imaginations of India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century preceding the emergence of the left and socialism in national struggle.

### **Concluding observation**

The freedom movement was a struggle for Swaraj, and for which the Indians had to awaken themselves. The path to independence was through attaining freedom within. Modi's context is very different. India is politically independent, but post-independence it had fallen prey to westernization and a colonial mindset. Beyond political independence, full Swaraj was aborted. Modi contends that we reconnect with our past, recover our true identity, and move towards complete Swaraj. '*Ashmita Jagran*' in people is important as it will facilitate the path to India's greatness among nations. New India shall be built on the foundation of the Hindu nation. This implies building Hindu solidarity, for which caste differences and conflict should give way to caste harmony, and establishing a socially egalitarian society. Further, for New India to emerge the spirit of Atamnirbharata should pervade all state institutions, social arrangements and individuals.

The Swa of New India is based on the RSS-BJP understanding of India's history, civilization, and post-independence experience, which is so divergent from the Nehruvian Congress. Just as Nehru shifted the culturalist discourse after independence by marginalizing the Hindu traditionalists and Hindu nationalists, post-2014 Modi has changed the Nehruvian nationalist discourse by centering cultural nationalism, and by encouraging a revisit and discovery of pre-Nehruvian nationalist thought in the Hindu traditionalist and nationalists' streams.

Let me conclude that the imagination of the Swa of New India is away from the long shadow of Macaulay and is informed by Swaraj. Secondly, the imagination of New India has arisen out of the crisis that post-colonial rule under the Western epistemic dominance of 'post-colonialism' and the historical process of globalization has produced. Just as colonial conditions gave rise to certain kinds of imaginations of the Swa and Swaraj, the post-independent, 'post-colonial' conditions and globalization have spawned a new imagination of India's self. Third, Modi's vision of New India has great resonance among large sections of people, especially among those who subscribe to RSS's cultural nationalism. Such support cuts across class, gender, age and caste. Fourth, those who are opposed to Hindutva deprecate Modi's vision of New India as it is a synonym for establishing a Hindu Rashtra. Minorities are therefore not attracted to Modi's New India. Fifth, the vision is meant to inspire people to work hard, with self-belief, and confidence towards the goal of national resurgence. If people get imbued with that vision enormous energy, and innovative creativity of its people could be unleashed, and that could propel India to become a developed nation, and perhaps the Vishwa Guru that Vivekanand and Aurobindo had thought was India's unique genius, but that would depend on the willingness of others to listen and how much hard power would New India carry.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that no competing interest exist

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