

Swaraj in the Anthropocene Age

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It is generally agreed that we are now living in the Anthropocene Age. This geological age is characterised by the large-scale destruction of nature and environment by human activities. Global warming and environmental pollution are endangering biodiversity and human life itself. The equilibria and balances inherent in nature are being so irrevocably undermined that earth's biological destruction has become irreversible. A prime case is that of the health of rivers, a concern especially relevant to India. The central government has been spending thousands of crores for many decades to clean up Ganga and Yamuna. But the results have been very disappointing. The courts have opined that rivers can be likened to living beings with inalienable rights that may not be taken away by humans exploiting their resources limitlessly.

Here we shall try to see how the concept of Swaraj can help us understand the problem of human-nature relationships and find the way to their solution. A point of departure for this discussion was provided by Waterman Rajendra Singh who recently said that the problem of rivers may be understood through the concept of Jal Swaraj. He was speaking at an event organised to take stock of the recent flooding of the river Yamuna in Delhi. What he meant perhaps was that natural water bodies like Rivers and Lakes have their own inherent attributes and processes, which when divested of them by human actions, result in their losing their essential characteristics. For example, a river can be considered as a water body that has a minimum and continuous ecological flow. When, through the construction of dams and other activities like dumping industrial and human waste, this ecological and minimum flow is disrupted, the river no longer remains a river in the true sense. That is to say, for the river to retain its natural characteristics (i.e., for it to remain a river), it must be granted its autonomy or Swaraj so that it may discharge its functions uninterrupted. Similarly a natural Lake must be granted Swaraj to function like a Lake. In that sense Jal Swaraj makes a case for water bodies to be granted Swaraj so that they remain true to their natural behaviour.

This idea of Jal Swaraj can be extended to cover all natural phenomena. Beginning with Jal, we may discuss Jungle Swaraj and then Jameen Swaraj. Jungle Swaraj would mean letting the Forests grow unhindered by human activities. Jameen

Swaraj would mean letting land retain and enrich its natural fertility based on humus and bio-organisms by not allowing it to become barren with the application of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Going for no-till organic agriculture would help. We might extend this idea of Swaraj to cover Oceans, Mountains, the Arctic and Antarctic snow masses, with each having its own Swaraj.

Two related points may be mentioned here. One is the problem of defining clearly the boundary line where the Swaraj of natural bodies (or nature itself) ends and the Swaraj of human societies begins. Because it is impossible to conceive of a situation where human needs (but not greed!) can be met without some degree of exploitation of nature. The question is what is the critical limit beyond which a natural body loses its Swaraj and is destroyed permanently? The IPCC has estimated that global warming beyond 1.5 deg. Celsius (compared to pre-industrial times) will irreversibly damage Earth and make it inhospitable for humans. Similar benchmarks for other natural bodies need to be worked out to ensure that their Swaraj remains unaffected by human activities.

A related question is - how do we ensure that human interventions in natural bodies are restricted to less than the critical point so that their Swaraj is not destroyed? So far the modern capitalist societies and governments have shown little inclination to limit nature's exploitation to certain mutually agreed limits, below which Earth can continue to support human life and biodiversity. Since capitalism flourishes through unbridled consumption, expecting it to curb consumption would be like asking it to commit suicide. We are forced to conclude that so long as the current capitalism engendered mad rush to consume is not put an end to, we cannot expect the Swaraj of human societies and the Swaraj of nature to co-exist. The ever widening universe of Autonomy of Autonomies that will include both human societies and nature itself, must be established for that to happen. Capitalism is a hindrance to that process.