

For August 2023 Weekly Meetings  
Swaraj: A Law of Nature

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[The following note is aimed at what may be taken to be a plausible attitude to approach imagination of Swaraj.]

In this note let us distinguish between a *law of nature* and a *natural law*.

Natural law is a law as it is understood in its strict sense in physics, a law such as, say, Maxwell's law of electromagnetism. Or a law understood in a derived sense in science in general. By derived we mean an actual, or an assumed, or sometimes even a hoped-for, strictly mathematical derivation from other (more fundamental) laws with some added principles of theory derivation, like the Occam's razor. The spirit of the phrase 'an assumed, or at times even hoped-for' is that of 'must be derivable'. For example, natural laws of thermodynamics, chemistry, life sciences, genetics, and complex systems in general etc. This is not to in any way to suggest that practice of science is in any way obsessed just with discovery of laws. No one can deny that with the expansion of the scientific enterprise, a whole ambit of outcomes, other than just the observation tables themselves, has been brought under the head 'scientific discoveries'. However, the epistemological aim remains the discovery of a natural law in the above sense.

Now, let us take *laws of nature* to comprise of natural laws and *moral laws*.

This suggests a shift in the meaning of the term *law*, possibly in many senses. The following may be one of them:

A natural law in physics may never be violated. If some law is found to be violated, then another (non-violable) law is (to be) discovered to replace it. The term *violation* here means two things: one, that no natural phenomena violate the law; and two, that *no* act (experiment) premised on a violation

is guaranteed to succeed, and that every act (experiment) premised on non-violation *is* guaranteed to succeed.

The new meaning of law implied above may not demand that. Instead, it might demand that a violation of a law will inevitably accompany a disturbance in the *lok*, and a *sustained* violation will inevitably lead to a disturbance, which may be so great as to threaten to destroy its internal balance and sustenance, and conceivably its very existence as a whole. This may be conceived as disruption of cycles, or of autonomous processes which maintain the balance.

A moral law will satisfy this demand. Modern Indian thinkers like Vivekanand, Aurobindo and particularly Gandhi talked of a ‘moral law’ in a presumably similar sense. For Gandhi human morality and civilization were inconceivable without a moral law. Such a demand also seems to be in consonance with Indian schools of philosophy, and the *chetana* of bahun (lokavidya) samaj (and possibly of all the traditional societies and indigenous peoples). The veracity of perception of (actual, or possibly impending) imbalance, or threat rests in this chetana.

Also, natural laws are still admitted as laws, either trivially (vacuously, because they are never violated), or non-trivially such as in statistical mechanical explanation of thermodynamics and in probabilistic theories of complex phenomena (because, the instances which may lead to violation of the derived law are few and far between). Now, any organized large scale sustained *application* of science (natural laws), say, on the part of the State, or industrial establishments, may cause a great imbalance threatening sustenance of the life of the Earth.<sup>1</sup> Although details of perceptions and interpretations might differ, this presumably *is* so the

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an instance of laying the blame actually resting with A (use of force, money power, corrupt practices, disregard of norms laid down, and so on), onto B's head. Whatever else happens, it does not deter from the fact that there is a large scale sustained application of science (natural laws) and the fact that consequences are as they are. Much of this is under contrived conditions, which would not occur naturally, say, as in processes demanding high temperature / pressure differences, or as in use of chemical fertilizers with NPK concentrations not available naturally, etc.

widely admitted cases of environmental degradation, large scale forced migrations and impoverishment of bahujan samaj. Let us view this as the sustained *violation* of a moral law. This reduces any presumed epistemological primacy of *natural* laws, or denies it altogether. The reversed situation – where unbridled *application* of moral laws leads to violation of a natural law – does not arise.

In this new sense, Swaraj *is* a law of nature. In particular, it is a moral law. Just as a natural law primarily concerns, and so is biased toward a description of the ‘non-living’ universe, a moral law primarily addresses the ‘living’ universe. Moreover, as in chetana of the bahujan samaj, ‘living’ universe may actually signify the entire universe.

How do we conceive of Swaraj from a standpoint of autonomy?

### Autonomy as ontology

I think of autonomy as a characteristic of all life (the living universe). It is the physiological basis as well as the conscious inspiration for all creative actions of human beings. It expresses itself fully in creative social actions. It makes sense to claim that autonomy constitutes an important ontological category. Truly autonomous creative social actions of an individual respect this ontology and are non-violative of autonomy of others. It is in and of such actions that living knowledge is born. A conceivable aspect of that knowledge is a sort of self-consciousness of possibility of continuity and sustenance of one’s own creative action in an environment reflecting diverse but similar actions.

### Swaraj as autonomy of autonomies

The concept of ‘autonomy of autonomies’ was suggested<sup>2</sup> in studies related to (political) autonomy in the Indian context (of Kashmir) in an attempt “to

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<sup>2</sup> Sanjay Chaturvedi: *The Ethno and the Geo: A New Look into the Issue of Kashmir’s Autonomy*, pp.139-72, in R. Samaddar (ed), *The Politics of Autonomy: Indian Experience* (2005)

question the presentation of “bordered state sovereignties” as “fulfillment of a historical destiny” etc. Knowledge in the context refers only ‘knowledge of autonomy’, and autonomy question is mostly seen to have a political resolution. Some of the ideas put forth to elaborate the concept resonate, with those limitations, with our programs like Gyan Panchayat, Lokavidya Pratishtha Abhiyan, Knowledge Satyagrah and Knowledge Dialogue, and with notions such as multiple identities, multiple knowledge traditions, opposition to hegemony of any knowledge system, necessity of both epistemological as well as ontological questioning, non-domination as principle of governance. These are ideas central to Swaraj, as we want to see it. We may regard the notion of ‘Autonomy of autonomies’ as an imagination in which the autonomies co-exist in harmony, or as that harmonious co-existence itself. We understand these autonomies as knowledgeable laghu-samaj’s (the term used in our SGP note) and interactions between them as a knowledge dialogue.

An imagination was created by Alan Weisman<sup>3</sup> in the book “World without Us”, for a scenario where humans suddenly disappear from the Earth. The book charts out a detailed outline of what might happen to human creations (homes, cities, farms, ...) and nature, and over what kind of time scales. It is a picture of uncontrolled autonomous progress with a huge variety of interactions involving animal species, forests, and climatic elements. The final picture may be regarded as a natural order, order of interconnected ecosystems, an autonomy of autonomies – the swaraj of nature, without humans.

We need an imagination of Swaraj with individual – samaj, samaj – samaj and samaj – nature relations and interactions, apart from those within nature. Apart from thinking of all these as autonomous entities, this calls for understanding human – nature interactions in the same manner and on the same footing as human-human interactions. It may be that this is akin to thinking of Swaraj as a moral order of nature.

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Weisman: “*World without Us*” (2007)