

For August 2023 Weekly Meetings

## On Swaraj in Our Times

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The extension of the idea of Swaraj in the latest version of the document poses a few problems – one is that we ascribe sentience and consciousness to natural entities and phenomena. Indian thought in the past did provide a place for this, for some time at least, respectively through the concepts of Rita (before it became truth) and Dharma as determining the “order” of things in Nature and for humans. Are we therefore saying that such thought constitutes a basis for extending the idea of Swaraj to Nature?

The problem does not vanish if one limits Swaraj to human society and eliminates reference to rivers and mountains being Swarajist. This is because the new imagination of Swaraj seems to be essentialist in its formulation. In its new role as the means to understand (or describe) the world (in ontological terms), it acquires a tendency to become a theory. We are not clear how this idea provides space for historically observed phenomena like trade, spread of religion or culture, expansion of linguistic groups, etc. The bigger problem here is this: what if some social formations do not share the ideas of justice, good life, rules, activity, etc. that it recommends?

A hundred years ago, the political and social context in which the idea of Swaraj developed was significantly different from what obtains today. Given the context of our times, the idea of Swaraj – as with most ideas of the past – becomes open to reification as it is interpreted and reinterpreted. We need to recognize that 21st century capitalism has a demonstrated ability to invert all subject-object relationships in the process of producing material and non-material goods. As a

consequence, all things that a Swarajist cherishes – justice, Nature, simplicity, etc. – tend to become concepts that conceal life processes and dominate the true dynamics of his interactions with others.

It is likely that in a mere matter of a few decades in India, capitalist production of material and ideas have played an important part in desensitizing and distancing a large fraction of the elite and middle classes from the actual processes of the world as well as the miseries of a majority; they are no longer felt, but cognized without affect and swept to the margins of perception.

Once the notion of Swaraj is reified, it becomes vulnerable to modern techniques of participation, organization, measurement and change management; either from within or from without. In which case, it no longer remains Swaraj. The subversion of all great ideas of the past is a clear reminder of the power of (post-)industrial society in every sphere of human life.

These problems need some attention while propagating the idea of Swaraj.