

Bahujan and Swaraj

Krishna Gandhi (24/06/2025)

Epistemology of Bahujan

What does the word Bahujan connote?

Why do we need to use the word and where do we need to use it?

Bahujan in plural can mean:

- Bahujan - Ordinary people
- Bahujan - Majority of people
- Bahujan - Collection of people not having access to power
- Bahujan - Working people (working classes)
- Bahujan - Non-professionals working in unorganised sectors
- Bahujan - Collection of SCs, STs, EBCs, OBCs. (all castes other than savarnas)

Bahujan in Singular can mean:

- Ordinary person
- Man in the street, common man
- Aam Aadmi
- Antim Vyakti
- Any person belonging to working class
- Any person who is not a savarna

Problems may arise in universalising the term Bahujan. Bahujan may not carry any meaning outside the Indian subcontinent or outside regions of Buddhist influence. For example, Bahujan may not carry any meaning in Europe, in the Americas, in Africa and Oceania.

If we were to divide humanity into different civilisations, different culturally coherent societies, different communities (sharing a common vocabulary/language/culture), as human societies historically evolved and are still evolving, then it is difficult to come up with a single word to typify the “ordinary people” (Bahujan) of these culturally and civilisationally different societies.

Should we attempt such an exercise at all? Is it at all needed in any discussion of Swaraj? It may appear that it is not needed. Because, in any imagination of Swaraj, there is very little scope for universalising terminologies and symbols. Yet, we need to create meta level words and symbols to conduct meaningful dialogues across languages, cultures and civilisations. Bahujan (ordinary people) and Antim Vyakti (the last person) have the potential to be such meta words.

A related question is - Is there a Swarajist way of transcending identities of exclusion (the extreme form of exclusion being apartheid) prevalent throughout the world? The uneven growth of capitalism in the world has resulted in people migrating to seek a better life in

countries other than their native ones. Globalisation has only added to the pace of this migration. In their own native countries, migrants face discrimination based on identities like caste, race, language, culture, religion, gender, and so on. This, along with unemployment and lack of economic opportunities pushes the discriminated and disadvantaged to migrate. The attraction of better working conditions, standards of living, employment opportunities and so on pull them to foreign countries. However, once the migrant worker shifts to the foreign country, she faces many of the same identity based discriminations that she had faced at home. Populist leaders in foreign countries exacerbate the identity based discrimination and exclusion by targeting the migrants for the problems faced by the native people.

Exclusion arises from differences in the practice of knowledge as well. Experts, professionals, and specialists who are part of structures of organised knowledge like universities and research institutions both traditional or modern, form the privileged minority in society. On the other hand, Lokvidyadhars, or ordinary people, who are outside such structures of knowledge, constitute the majority and are denied recognition. The minority of “experts” establish hegemony over the majority - the ordinary people, whose knowledge is dismissed as of no consequence.

In such a scenario, we need to coin an inclusive term that encompasses all ordinary people everywhere, and simultaneously transcends identities of exclusion. This would facilitate Swarajist discussions on ordinary people everywhere in the world, cutting across languages and cultures. Perhaps the word Bahujan (translated as ordinary people) that transcends identities of exclusion including those related to knowledge would serve that purpose. This means that Bahujan cannot be defined as any collection of people based on exclusive identities of caste, race, faith, language, culture, civilisation or region. Bahujan (singular) typifies the ordinary person present in all societies and transcends multiple exclusive identities. The only distinguishing characteristic of Bahujan will be that she is neither recognised as an expert, nor does she claim to be one.

The ontology of Swaraj

In the Swarajist imagination, the entire humanity (the ensemble of all human societies everywhere) can best be described as “The Autonomy of autonomies”. This is analogous to “The Internet” being the network of networks. In the Swarajist view, humanity constitutes an ensemble of autonomies which doesn't have a centre/periphery differentiation. Again, to give an analogy, this would correspond to the universe and the distribution of galaxies in it. Nor is there a hierarchical ordering of civilisations / cultures / nations within the ensemble of autonomies. No single entity controls the processes of evolution of the ensemble. The evolution has no deterministic goal or inevitability of outcome. The evolution is open ended: very many outcomes are possible.

In that sense, there doesn't exist a blueprint or a predetermined template on the basis of which the future Swarajist society will be built. The future is open ended and depends on what course of actions we opt for today. The Swarajist view denies the “Ends versus Means” dichotomy that characterises today's narrative of human development. If “End” means the

future goal of the establishment of a Swarajist society, and “Means” the path towards that goal, the Swarajist approach will be to uphold the primacy of the present, that is the path, over the future, that is the goal. That is, the future goal cannot dictate our present actions. In that sense, Swaraj is not something that we wait for to happen, or anticipate, or design in advance. It is something that needs to be circumscribed by the present, exercised and executed here and now, without being dictated by any blueprint or design of future Swaraj.

Therefore, in the Swarajist approach, Begumpura or Amaradesa of Sant Ravidas / Sant Kabir or any such imagination of an utopia is not what motivates our actions now. The ontology of Swaraj tells us that it is not the goal of a Swarajist society in future, but the Dhamma of Swaraj that should guide us in our present, in our daily life. This Dhamma must not only facilitate the introduction of new elements of Swaraj and also strengthen the old elements at every level in human society. Begumpura or such imaginations leading us to the goal of Swaraj at some point in time in future are teleological exercises. They carry the risk of the “Means” being made subservient to the “End” (abandoning the path of Dhamma in the pursuit of Swaraj).

Swaraj thus must be conceived as an inseparable existential dimension of our daily living . The Dhamma of Swaraj will be a conscious and deliberate exercise of Swaraj that communities and individuals must constantly and continuously engage in. This will result in an unbroken struggle to assert the autonomies of the individual and the collective, to whatever degree, whatever be the situation. At every moment, and in every situation, there will always be a choice between the path of Swaraj or the path of slavery. How that choice is exercised will determine whether humanity will move ahead on the path of Swaraj. We must constantly remind ourselves that Swaraj is a path and not a destination.