

**Swaraj**  
**The principle of self-organisation, self-regulation**  
**and self-governance of nature**

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**The human quest of understanding nature and our place in it.**

All studies so far have failed to locate any centre of the universe. Most probably it does not exist. Celestial objects and their formations including galaxies seem to be randomly distributed in the spacetime fabric of the universe. All indications are that the spatial and temporal extents of the universe are beyond our measure. The discovery of some galaxies older than the Bing Bang itself has led to a rethink of that theory. Despite human beings' observational window being very narrow due to the limitations of our sense organs, nature and its phenomena as observed are so varied and diverse that the task of understanding nature in its totality seems beyond our capabilities. Our quest for understanding nature in its entirety may thus be unrealisable. We may therefore have to be satisfied with a limited understanding (circumscribed by the reach of our senses) of our immediate neighbourhood in spacetime.

**Myths of creation and human destiny**

Many world views propose that there is some sort of central power or God that created nature and has continued to control it thereafter. This central power is conceived of as existing independent of and external to nature. It supposedly directs the evolution of nature, including humanity, in a particular direction and towards a particular goal. However, neither human history, nor nature's evolution, at least whatever we know of them, do not seem to support such an idea of a central power. There doesn't seem to exist, prima facie, any grand design, directed to a particular destiny, that creation seems inexorably progressing to. In spite of this, many prophets and saints of various religious persuasions have claimed, or are said to have claimed, that God revealed to them the grand design of creation and human destiny. Ordinary people, however, continue to live their entire lives without having any clue to this grand design, which, the privileged say, is beyond their capacity to comprehend. Since we do not and cannot put limits on ordinary people's capacities to comprehend nature, we are constrained to believe, along with ordinary people, that nature does not possess any grand design programmed by some supreme being to end in a particular destiny.

Despite this common sense view grounded in ordinary people's experiences, why have myths of grand design been propagated from time to time and believed by a significant number of people? Do such myths have any purpose other than serving the interests of some privileged sections of society? This needs a detailed study and discussion.

All that we can say is that nature functions according to laws inherent to it, many of which we humans have been able to discover. Engaging in a discussion on whether such laws are eternal or not, would be a futile exercise because we may never be able to prove or disprove such claims. We may, therefore, safely state that in the immediate neighbourhood of our location in spacetime, certain laws seem to prevail. Discovering them helps us humans to survive and sustain ourselves.

## **Human beings are part of nature, not separate from it**

Discarding all notions of being the masters of nature will be the correct starting point for humanity to seek a solution to the present problems of environmental destruction. Humanity is an integral part of nature and cannot exist or survive independent of nature. The moment human societies try to act as if they have an existence independent of nature, they will destroy nature as well as themselves.

## **Nature evolves autonomously by self-organising itself from basic building blocks**

Once we discard the existence of a grand design or a blueprint in nature's evolution (directed by an all powerful Supreme Being external to nature), we come to the conclusion that evolution is an autonomous process of nature. That is, nature as a whole, guided by laws inherent to it and part of it, self-evolves or self-develops. This self-evolution or self-development proceeds because of the tendency of the basic building blocks of nature to enter into certain stable, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating permutations and combinations. We may call this process the self-organisation of nature. There is no reason to believe that this process of the self-organisation of nature has, by now, exhausted all possible permutations and combinations of the basic building blocks and no new permutation or combination cannot emerge.

## **The Gaia Hypothesis and the concept of Earth as a Grand Ensemble of Ecosystems**

Given a conducive environment, the process of self organisation of nature results in an ecosystem. An ecosystem may be considered an autonomous system that has the inherent capacities of self-regulation and self-governance which ensure its continued survival in the face of fluctuations in the environment. **This ability of an ecosystem to self-organise, self-regulate and self-govern may therefore be called its inherent capacity of Swaraj. Every organism, every being, itself being an ecosystem, possesses the property of Swaraj.** Many ecosystems of nature manifest themselves in the form of cycles. The Carbon cycle, the Nitrogen cycle, the Water cycle, the cycle of seasons, all these may be termed nature's cyclical replenishment of itself. Multitudes of ecosystems are created and embedded in these simultaneous and autonomous cycles of nature. Such ecosystems may be found at different levels ranging from micro to macro scales. This gives rise to the idea that the Earth itself is a Grand Ensemble of such ecosystems.

The Gaia hypothesis of Earth has been modelled on the concept of biological homeostasis. Homeostasis is the state of steady internal, physical, chemical, and social conditions maintained by living systems. Homeostasis is brought about by a natural resistance to change when the organism is already in optimal conditions, and equilibrium is maintained by many regulatory mechanisms. It is thought to be the central motivation for all organic action. The Gaia hypothesis claims that the resident life forms of Earth coupled with their environment act like a single, self-regulating system. This system includes the near-surface rocks, the soil, and the atmosphere. Thus Gaia, the Earth, can itself be conceived as an ecosystem and thus possessing the property of Swaraj. Since in addition to being an ecosystem itself, the Earth encompasses many embedded ecosystems, including human communities, we may call Earth an example of Autonomy of Autonomies.

## Centralisation is anathema to Swaraj

The above description of the ontological character of nature and its embedded ecosystems (including human societies) is countered by narratives or myths of human history as the unfolding of a grand design. In this narrative, human destiny is a linear one-way one-time journey from the day of creation to the day of apocalypse. All human actions, whether of commission or omission, are said to be guided by the Supreme Being, and leading towards a grand destiny or purpose. These myths have been propounded by many religions and philosophies. Some seek to prove, based on Darwin's theory of evolution, that humans are destined to evolve into superhumans and conquer the Earth, the Solar System, the Milky Way and ultimately the whole Universe. This conception of human destiny inevitably leads to centralisation of power in the hands of a privileged few. These few (the rulers) would claim exclusive knowledge of the grand design and also that they are the chosen ones commanded by God to implement His Plan. This narrative of a command structure leads the rulers on a path of progressive domination over nature and the rest of humanity, all justified in the name of God and His grand design.

The above linear conception of human destiny helps all those who manage centralised systems (the capitalist system included) to project themselves as the deliverers of the grand goal of human domination over the universe. These teleological narratives would justify all injustice, inequalities, exploitation as necessary and unavoidable sacrifices the majority of humanity have to make to realise the grand designs of God.

Such narratives or myths of human destiny negate the ideas of Autonomy of Autonomies and Swaraj. They represent a deterministic, closed-ended view of history. On the other hand, the Swarajist view of history is an open-ended one, where the choice of deliberate and voluntary actions of humans at present leads humanity to a non-predetermined future. The premise that God's design is known only to a privileged few on whom God has bestowed the responsibility to execute it strikes at the very root of the conception of Swaraj as the self-organisation of ordinary people. Thus, an irreconcilable contradiction exists between the teleological promise of a grand destiny and the ontological condition of Swaraj.

## Swabhav, Swadharma and Swaraj

**Swabhav** and **Swadharma** are also concepts that easily meld into the idea of **Swaraj**. **Swabhav** can be stated as the attributes that distinguish one being from another or one entity from another. Like in the fable of the mouse that was blessed with a human form by a Rishi only for it to yearn to be reborn as a mouse, every species has its own unique characteristics or **swabhav** that set it apart from other species. This **swabhav** of a species in turn determines the role or **swadharma** that it plays in nature. This leads us to the related idea that every species in nature is unique and plays an irreplaceable role in nature. The selective wiping out of many species, animals or plants or both, as a result of human activity, irreversibly damages the autonomies of Earth's ecosystems.

When applied to non living entities, **swabhav** would imply that each entity or class of entities has its own specific characteristics that distinguishes it from other entities. This is like stating that the Earth, the Moon and the Sun all have distinct properties (**swabhav**) and consequently follow different **swadharma**. Similarly, a river has the **swabhav** of flowing water and the **swadharma** of flowing from higher to lower level, while a lake has the **swabhav** of accumulation of water and the **swadharma** of collecting water.

## **Diversity and Swaraj mutually reinforce each other**

This leads us to look at the symbiotic connection between Swaraj and Diversity. As mentioned before centralisation proceeds by regimentation or imposition of uniformity in thought and action. This destroys both Swaraj and Diversity. Diversity is the space where Swaraj blooms because acceptance of diversity implies respect for the “other” and the “other's” autonomy. An environment of diversity opposes tendencies of centralisation and subjugation. Since historical times Swaraj has been India's civilisational value, with diversity and the respect for diversity inherent in Indian society. That is why all attempts at homogeneity and religious, social and political centralisation failed in India. Respect for the “other”, that is, respect for diversity is a foundational value of Indian civilization which made it possible for the flowering of Swaraj throughout India's history. We may even say that Swaraj and Diversity are two sides of the same coin.

## **Swaraj is incompatible with Hierarchy**

Centralisation inevitably leads to regimentation which in turn leads to a hierarchically ordered society. In such a society, the respect for diversity, in other words, respect for the “other” is absent. This leads to a situation where certain communities are deemed to be subservient to another community or communities. In India, the Vedic religion ordered occupational castes (jatis) in the hierarchical varna system. The Brahmins as a varna appropriated to themselves the role of law givers and law interpreters/judges. This resulted in the diminished self-rule or Swaraj of the other jatis. Not only the non-Brahmin jatis lost their self rule, like their power to decide their own occupations, but even the rules of mutual interactions among non-Brahmin jatis were laid down by the Brahmins.

This also leads us to a discussion of hierarchy within a geographically limited unit of Swaraj, like a village. It is true that in pre-British India, villages enjoyed a great deal of autonomy/Swaraj. The state/king had a negligible role in the internal affairs of the village. But the question needs to be discussed as to whether the hierarchical ordering of different communities (jatis) under the varna system resulted in the disproportionate diminution of the Swaraj of the different jatis. This is important if we assert that India's message of Swaraj is very relevant for a political imagination of a future world, based on justice, giving, and fraternity (nyay, tyag aur bhaichara). We need to inquire whether the yajmani system of agriculture practised in the past in India's villages resulted in a fair exchange of goods and services among the different communities of the village, and ensured their well-being. The claim that the old panchayati system of collective and consensual decision making ensured that all jatis had more or less equal say in the management of the village affairs also needs to be examined.

All these above concerns arise from the apprehension that hierarchical ordering of communities (jatis) within a village leads to the domination of a set of communities by another and consequent disproportionate diminution of Swaraj among them. When we examine, outside human societies, an ecosystem in nature as being the equivalent unit of Swaraj, we see that there is no hierarchy within it. All the constituents of the ecosystem have equal importance and each and every constituent plays an equally vital and indispensable role in the sustenance of the ecosystem. Elimination or weakening of any component will cause the ecosystem to collapse. But unfortunately, we seem to ignore this lesson of nature and think that all constituent communities of a village are not equally vital and indispensable

for the sustenance of the village. It seems that the Vedic religion which imposed the hierarchical varna system on society is responsible for this. Even more unfortunate is that even after the Brahmins have been effectively driven out of the villages, at least in South India, the cultural hangover of the hierarchical varna system refuses to die. The dominant Sudras of the villages, previously at the receiving end, themselves are now practising neo-Brahminism vis a vis the untouchables. The notions of hierarchy in social relations have been so internalised that it has become impossible to root them out. It is much like, after driving out the Angrez, we Indians after Independence have wholeheartedly embraced “Angreziat” as our way of life.

It is important to note that for the village Swaraj to flourish, the village has to rebuild itself as an ecosystem with its constituents entering into a mutually beneficial and complimentary relationship with one another. This is not possible with any form of hierarchy practised among the communities of the village. Any political imagination of Swaraj has to repudiate hierarchy if it is to galvanise the people to achieve Swaraj.

### **Swaraj Chetna - self knowledge of Swadharma**

We can associate with each entity in nature its own **swaraj chetna**, or knowledge of its own **swadharma** (role). This innate knowledge of every being or entity of its own **swadharma** would then naturally lead it (entity or being) to the realisation of its **swaraj**. This way of looking at the world would help us understand that **swaraj chetna** permeates all beings in creation, including human beings individually and collectively.

Naturally, there needs to be a system of conflict resolution to ensure that the **swaraj** of one being/entity does not encroach upon the **swaraj** of another. Rules have to be formulated and enforced by society regarding the limits to autonomy (**swaraj**) that can be practiced by entities in their mutual interactions. Aberrations of one being/entity subjugating another must be avoided. Also, arbitrary limitations of the swaraj of any entity on the basis of gender, caste, religion, race, language, and so on must be totally avoided. The basic condition for this to be achieved is to conceive **Swaraj** as an **Autonomy of autonomies** along with the acceptance by all of the **principle of non-domination**.