

RETHINKING SVARĀJ IN IDEAS

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The concept of Swarājya or Svarāj has as its natural home the political discourse that became prevalent during the earlier decades of the twentieth century. Indeed this was the political *Mantra* for a whole generation of freedom fighters and political activists of that era under the leadership of Gandhi. The principles of *Ahimsā* and Satya formed the inalienable core of the Ideal of Svarāj as it was envisioned by the Mahatma in the context of our political struggle for freedom. In such a politically surcharged climate when we were struggling for self-determination in politics K.C. Bhattacharya, perhaps the most eminent thinker and philosopher of the Century spoke of the need for achieving Svarāj in Ideas? In essence, this was a wake up call to the nation against the domination perpetrated by the west in the domain of our intellectual and cultural tradition. He describes it as 'cultural subjection' - a subtler domination exercised in the sphere of ideas by one culture on another, a domination all the more serious in the consequence, because it is not ordinarily felt'. By way of elaboration, he also maintains, for example, 'we have never cared to understand the *inwardness* of our traditional social structure and to examine how far the social principles of the west are universal in their application. We have contented ourselves either with an unthinking conservatism or with an imaginary progressiveness merely *imitative* of the west'. (Quotation from K.C. B's essay 'Svaraj in Ideas' published in the *IPQ* Vol. XI, No.4 October, 1984, my emphasis) In this paper, I shall make an attempt to unpack the possible senses of the concept of Svarāj in the realm of ideas. I would suggest that though a positive formulation of the concept is problematical perhaps a more useful approach would be to develop our understanding through its negative formulation.

I

Can we still meaningfully speak of 'Svarāj' in ideas even after fifty years of our political freedom? At the time KCB spoke of 'Svarāj in Ideas' his main lament was that Indian culture was under the domination of western culture. Thus in essence, it was an appeal for freeing Indian culture from the influence of the west. But what sense are we to make of it in the present day context? From the standpoint of the nation, is it possible to insulate ourselves against the rest of the world? Indeed, with the advent of the new and sophisticated technologies in IT the whole world is turned into, as they say, a 'global village.' With such large-scale and speedy transmission of ideas and information across the globe the contours of the divide between 'our culture-their culture' have become somewhat blurred. Given such fast-changing IT scenario where sharing is the password any attempt at isolationism would be completely out of joint with the times. There is an intermix of ideas in all spheres of human life and endeavour which find their legitimation at the level of lived reality. So long as such cross-fertilisation of ideas turn out to be workable from the practical point of view one may well take it to be a process of assimilation. How can we reverse this process in the name of Svarāj?

Perhaps at this stage, one may argue that the message of Svarāj holds good for us from the point of view of our *own* culture. This also presents a problematic. In the first place, what we identify as our culture does not represent a monolithic whole, it is a criss-cross of several diverse trends, thought-structures, practices and values. Nor is it something static and ossified. Its inner dynamism makes for its strength and fecundity. It would be difficult to delineate the basic features of 'our' culture and to be able to retain their 'purity' as it were, if that is what is meant by Svarāj.

It would be well to remind ourselves here that KCB does indeed grant the dynamic nature of our culture as he allows for the possibility of assimilation of other influences to some extent, though he is quite against the 'hybridisation of ideas'. Furthermore, KCB also makes out a case for '*universalism*' and goes on to argue that this can come about only by following 'a legitimate and obligatory form of rationalism'. Here, in this context he distinguishes two forms of rationalism: One, by which we make comparisons and decide as to what is essential and what is inessential in a somewhat mechanical manner without feeling our way through these; the other, which is based on 'reverence for the traditional institutions' and

with 'deepened spiritual insight', and, it is this form of rationalism that is legitimate for moving towards the goal of universalism. In other words, while KCB speaks of Svarāj he also allows for 'assimilation' of ideas from other cultures and makes out a case for 'universalism' as well. A sympathetic understanding of 'Svarāj in Ideas' will depend on how best we succeed in reconciling it with ideas of (a) assimilation of influences from other cultures, and (b) the case for universalism. However, before we proceed in this direction let us take note of one or two other considerations.

So far we have tried to reflect, though very briefly, on 'Svarāj in Ideas' from the standpoint of the *nation* as a geo-political unit and from that of *culture* as of a distinct identity. Let us turn to another consideration, - that of ideas having their own ontological autonomy. In a way, ideas as such are value-neutral and inhabit in their own world; they are not bound by geographical or political contours. New ideas arise and hostile with the older ones till they form complex thought-structures which then dominate individual minds or a collectivity of minds. The process may well cut across all man-made boundaries. For that matter, if we take a cross section of the histories of ideas of different cultures we are quite likely to come across commonalties and areas of similarities, though more perhaps in the domain of philosophical ideas. From such a perspective 'Svaraj' might well mean complete autonomy of ideas or thought-structures where such autonomy is derived from the logical relation between ideas. The topic of intellectual property rights could well be viewed and examined from the perspective of the autonomy of ideas in this sense.

And now, let us look to the concept of 'Svarāj' from the standpoint of the individual or groups of individuals. The problematic here is provided by the role played by the State or its agencies which may well succeed in manipulating and dominating in the sphere of intellectual ideas and cultural activities. Where does the individual (or group) stand vis-a-vis the State in such matters? The dangers of such domination by the State are too well known to need any further elaboration. Suffice it to say that the State can and often does tend to dominate over the individual (or group) through a well-structured policy of awards, rewards and patronages for its favoured research projects, creative artefacts and activities. Literacy and artistic activities derive their legitimation on the strength and backing of the State. The so-called 'autonomy' of the State agencies (Akademies, Councils,

etc.) which rule over these spheres of human endeavours invests them only with greater manipulative powers. If the State favours a certain ideological stance the individual must fall in line if he wants to gain any recognition in the chosen field. Historical and philosophical research projects, literary trends, artistic works, sociological studies, and creative projects in various other fields carried out by individuals (groups) are not completely free from the domination by the State. Svarāj for the individual carries an appeal to try and transcend parochial interests and the influence of the State.

II

In this section, let us look to some of the emphasis that KCB lays down in terms of the negative formulation of the concept of Svarāj. Perhaps this would provide the key to a better understanding of the concept. It would be well to recall that KCB wants us to ward ourselves off against the following:

- I. Uncritical rejection of one's own tradition;
- II. Imitating other cultures;
- III. Hybridisation of ideas which creates confusion;
- IV. Acceptance of ideas from other cultures without subjecting these to critical examination; and,
- V. Use of that form of rationalism which makes judgements in a mechanical way.

For some of these, KCB has been made the target of unfair criticism as he has been accused of preaching 'isolationism,' 'conservatism', 'traditionalism' and so on. However, if these ideas are tied up together in a systematic manner a coherent thought pattern emerges which not only throws light on the concept of 'Svarāj' but also shows that it is complementary to 'universalism' in some sense.

Let us begin by attending to the distinction that KCB draws between 'assimilation' of ideas on one hand and mere uncritical 'acceptance' of ideas, on the other. The latter masks what may be described as 'hybridisation' of ideas which leads to confusion. For KCB, assimilation is a slow but thorough process which requires the use of a special form of rationalism that operates with reverence for one's own tradition, and not by abstracting mechanically the outward similarities and divergences between ideas. This form of rationalism is against 'unthinking conservatism' because reverence for one's tradition must make one feel into its

living form as it has an inner dynamism. A tradition that lacks fecundity ceases to be a living tradition. Its organic structure would draw sustenance and strength from everything that can be assimilated into it and would discard whatever cannot be. KCB therefore stresses the need for understanding the 'inwardness' of the tradition. Indeed such 'understanding' would be, to my mind, of the kind that is applicable to a work of art rather than to a problem in logic or mathematics. Understanding a poem, for example, is not merely making sense of the words in it in a mechanical fashion but rather feeling its inwardness or the emotive resonance. In other words, understanding the inwardness or the tradition would mean *participating* in it which should be considered quite different from viewing it from the outside and thereby taking note of the outward signs and symbols. Perhaps another example would be helpful here. If a person wants to *pretend* to be another character X or Y he has only to imitate certain external traits and behavioural patterns. But if a stage or film actor has to play such a character he will have to *live* that role (during the period of the performance), he cannot get away with a mere act of pretending of imitation. One may recall in this connection KCB's explicit lament about our 'imaginary progressiveness merely imitative of the west'.

There is another point about this participative understanding of one's tradition which merits attention. In the actor's example while participating in the performance and with the deepening of his understanding as he grows into the performed character he brings to bear on his performance his own *interpretation* of the character. Thus the same role when played by another actor may be played differently. Here the actor is not merely playing a role but often makes a definite contribution of his own in developing the character according to his own interpretation of it. Understanding one's own tradition is a similar venture in many way. Just as it is possible to tell a good or powerful performance from a bad one because of the imitative nature of the latter one can also speak of the distinction between understanding the tradition and merely pretending to do so. But all this is for the *Sahṛdaya* to do. What is important here is to realise that merely a dry intellectual formulation of one's tradition is not enough for its understanding unless it is duly backed up with the lived *experiential* content of its inwardness. This also gives one the freedom to creatively *interpret* one's own tradition.

Now from the perspective of the individual such interpretation would vary according as one brings to bear upon it one's background in terms of the lived

experience of it. The point that needs to be stressed here is that a living tradition is quite amenable to *different* interpretations, and for the individual to be able to *freely* work out such interpretation regardless of domination from the State or the other cultures is to achieve a degree of Svarāj in ideas. This is not to mean that the individual must remain within the straight-jacket of his tradition as it has been understood or interpreted by *others*. Quite on the contrary, the individual must assert his freedom to discard whatever does not fit into his own interpretation as also to welcome whatever helps him work into his interpretation that would lead to a more enriched and coherent whole. The creative aspect of this entire process must not be lost sight of. One can then understand and account for the significant departures that come about with respect to the age old traditions and practices. Clearly then, Svarāj does not mean either 'traditionalism' or 'isolationism'. Far from it, Svarāj, to my mind, is a call for robust and vigorous creativism in every sphere of life and thought process. It requires as much intellectual strength and courage for the individual to critically examine his own tradition that he has inherited as also to be able to stand up against any kind of domination from whichever quarters.

Now, how does Svarāj fit in with the case for 'universalism'? Indeed, KCB clarifies that the sense in which he speaks of it relates only to the spirit and not to the content of ideas. This goes as much for Svarāj as for Universalism, the spirit or form of Svarāj can become universal without affecting diversities that the various traditions represent. Inwardisation of the spirit of a tradition can be held out as an universal objective, and this way different traditions can coexist without any mutual conflict.

Svarāj is not a mere intellectual concept that can be understood by means of a rigorous ratiocinative process. Like its other cognates, such as, 'nationalism', 'cultural unity' and so on, its full meaning can be realised by attending to the lived experiential content. How can one understand the meaning of patriotism or nationalism without actually feeling an upsurge of emotions intermixed with reverence and pride? In fact, this calls for a phenomenology of Svarāj with its strong focus on the experiential aspect of it.

It would be seen that in our foregoing discussion the emphasis has been mainly on the individual and on how Svarāj would make sense from his perspective; for, the concept of 'Svarāj in Ideas' seems to have relevance for the individual in

a way that it has neither from the perspective of our 'culture' nor from that of our nation. The individual participates both in the national as well as cultural life, and faces the challenge from the either to his individual freedom and autonomy. It is only in this context that Svaraj in the sphere of ideas becomes relevant as a meaningful methodological device for the individual to adopt. Against all manners of domination and influences the individual can choose to interpret the tradition that he belongs to as also can contribute toward its growth and progress.

What has been said so far would go not only for tradition in a more comprehensive sense but also for particular traditions in different areas of human endeavour, such a, intellectual, philosophical, artistic tradition and so on. One who is working in any of these spheres joins the mainstream of tradition at a particular point of time in its history and has to try and make sense of it in whatever form it comes to him. How can one speak of 'purity' of a tradition as it is constantly undergoing change through the assimilation of newer ideas and so on? But as we discussed earlier, one can meaningfully speak about the inwardness of a tradition in whatever form it is inherited. A tradition which is experienced as a lived reality alone can have significance for the individual. No significant break-through can be achieved within a tradition by effecting merely a patch-work of ideas such as are received from the outside. One can perhaps hope to make some contribution to it only after one has felt its inner spirit, though this can come about only by degrees.

Let me now briefly recapitulate the main points in the foregoing discussion. Svarāj in Ideas stands for a methodological device with its appeal for a special kind of attitude wherby one develops an intuitive understanding of the cultural tradition in and under which one lives and works. Because of its fecund form, a living culture has the inherent possibility of change and fruther growth. Svarāj for the individual would mean exploring this possibility and not following the tradition in a stereotyped manner. This is a challenge which must be faced by the individual at his own level. The spirit of Svarāj brooks no domination from outside, of whatever nature. A self-critical temper would check against passive acceptance of whatever the tradition has to offer from within as also against mere imitation of what the other traditions tend to thrust from outside. In this sense, Svarāj also carries the message for discarding such of the ideas and practices that cannot be accommodated within the organic structure of the tradition. Finally, Svarāj is a call

for the individual to participate in the tradition and to *interpret* it in a creative spirit.

One implication of a practical nature that would seem to follow from the last point is this. Speaking of our intellectual tradition in the present-day context it would mean paying greater attention to the writings of our own scholars and thinkers rather than looking westward almost with an obsessive interest. If we look, for example, to the philosophical activity that is being carried on in and through the pages of a very few journals that are published in India one would immediately notice a distinct slant towards paying a great deal of attention to what the western scholars have to say even by way of critical comment on what other scholars in their *own* intellectual tradition have said. In very rare cases, if some attention is paid to one or two Indian philosophers it may be for reasons of their work having been published in the west. The present scenario in the area of philosophical writing shows a marked bias in this respect. Unfortunately, even in the matter of appointments of academic positions in our universities which is done generally on the basis of the recommendations from peer-groups, there is shown a distinct preference for those who get their degrees from the universities abroad. This indeed is a sad commentary on the State of affairs that obtains in our universities even 50 years after achieving political Svarāj. The question that we should be asking ourselves is this: Can we not shake off this west-centric bias? For that matter why should a scholar who receives his degrees from some university in the west must always be preferred in all matters over those who are products of the Indian Universities? Unless we are prepared to do some soul-searching in these matters Svarāj will remain a mere Utopia.

NOTE

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