Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Gandhi’s Concept of Swaraj: Some Critical Thoughts on Parel’s Reading of Swaraj

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Introduction

Gandhi associates very diverse meanings with the concept of swaraj. Sometimes he uses it to refer to the national independence and on some other occasions he relates it with the spiritual freedom of the individual. He uses it as synonym to liberty, autonomy, political freedom of individual, nation’s economic freedom, individual’s freedom from poverty, self-realization, self-rule, freedom from alien rule and so on. For the purpose of analysis, Anthony J. Parel in his essay “Gandhian Freedoms and Self-rule” groups these various meanings under four headings; national independence, political freedom of the individual, economic freedom of the individual, and individual’s spiritual freedom or self-rule. Though these divisions are very helpful in understanding different aspects of Gandhi’s concept of swaraj, they generate the following confusions. First, since Parel focuses on the different dimensions of meaning of the concept of swaraj, he misses its comprehensiveness. Second, Parel not only
groups Gandhi’s notion of *swaraj* into four but also distinguishes the first three from the last one. The title of his paper—“Gandhian Freedoms and Self-Rule”—itself points to such a distinction. In another paper he affirms that out of the four *purusharthas* of the orthodox Indian tradition—*dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha*—only the first three, according to Gandhi, belong to the province of politics and political philosophy, while *moksha* lies outside. Though for Gandhi politics *per se* is not the pursuit of *moksha* both politics and political philosophy ought to recognise it as the final end of all human striving.

This paper tries to argue that such distinction may not do justice to Gandhi’s philosophical position because he did not believe in any boundaries between different aspects of human life and as Parel himself observes, in Gujarati Gandhi used the same word, *swaraj*, in order to express all the four aspects of freedom. Therefore this paper attempts to find out a common definition of *swaraj* which can explain all the four aspects which Parel describes. It also argues that, Parel distinguishes between self-rule and other three aspects of *swaraj* owing to his belief that self-rule or *moksha* for Gandhi lies outside the domain of politics. On the contrary this paper affirms that, although Gandhi speaks of the metaphysical or transcendental idea of *moksha*, it has a predominantly pragmatic value in his philosophy and for him the best possible self-rule or *moksha* consists in the ability to act well in every sphere of human life. This paper tries to
elaborate this with four sections, each trying to define one aspect of Gandhi’s idea of *swaraj* keeping its inseparable relation with others intact.

**National Independence**

According to Parel, Gandhi understood *swaraj* for the nation as the ‘collective freedom from alien rule’. He observes that there is nothing original in understanding *swaraj* in terms of ‘a collective freedom from alien rule’. Nor there is anything novel in the idea of fighting for its attainment. He believes that Gandhi’s originality lies in his use of non-violence as a powerful method in attaining *swaraj*. Parel observes that according to Gandhi, independence is necessary but not sufficient for full human flourishing, whether at the national or at the individual level. For Gandhi, argues Parel, independence is negative freedom while self-rule is positive freedom. Parel adds that the latter requires ‘self-restraint’ or ‘disciplined rule from within’ And for Gandhi *swaraj*, different from the word ‘independence’ which is a modern concept, is a ‘sacred’ or ‘Vedic’ word coming from the very origins of Indian civilization. While independence does not require any ‘disciplined rule from within’, *swaraj* is essentially self-rule.

It is obvious from the above that Parel very clearly draws a line between independence and self-rule and considers the latter as relatively more important. Hence his analysis reduces the possibility of initiating a search for a common definition to Gandhi’s concept of *swaraj*,
encompassing all its different aspects. On the other hand it also minimizes the possibility of considering Gandhi as a serious political thinker who has something more to say about the concept of swaraj for the nation than merely as ‘a collective freedom from alien rule’.

This paper argues that for Gandhi swaraj for the nation does not mean a mere collective freedom from the alien rule. He was proposing a more comprehensive idea, which will comfortably and harmoniously reconcile all other aspects of swaraj with the idea of individual-spiritual freedom or self-rule. It is obvious that since 1920 Gandhi’s political activities predominantly aimed at ‘a collective freedom from alien rule’. But it is evident that for him swaraj meant more than this. In an article titled “A Word on Explanation”, published on 26th January 1921, Gandhi explains his current position about Hind Swaraj, which he has written in 1909. This was used as the foreword for the next edition of Hind Swaraj. Gandhi writes:

“But I would warn the reader against thinking that I am today aiming at the Swaraj described therein. I know that India is not ripe for it. It may seem an impertinent to say so. But such is my conviction. I am individually working for the self-rule pictured therein. But today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj, in accordance with the wishes of the people of India”.

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Here Gandhi, very explicitly, says that, though his corporate activities are devoted to attain a collective freedom from alien rule which he calls ‘Parliamentary Swaraj’, his conception of swaraj for the nation which he has articulated in the Hind Swaraj does not exhaust with it. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi very vigorously rejects the idea which equates swaraj for the nation merely with the overthrowing of the British. He conveys this idea on many occasions and in many ways. On another occasion Gandhi affirms that by patriotism he means the welfare of the whole people, and if he could secure it at the hands of the English, he should bow down his head to them.\(^5\)

Indeed Gandhi’s analysis and understanding of swaraj for the nation is much deeper than as it is usually understood. From the very beginning of his active political career, he understood that it cannot be attained just by throwing the British out of India. He knew very well that tyranny of any Indian ruler can be just as much as that of the British. He writes that his patriotism does not teach him that he can allow people to be crushed under the heel of Indian Princes.\(^6\) He was also equally aware of the fact that imperialism and colonialism not only dehumanized the colonized but also brutalized the colonizers.

The programme of Satyagraha, which Gandhi designed in order to attain Swaraj, in no way aims at physically throwing out the British or any opponent. It is a very unique method which seeks to change the heart of
the opponent by personal suffering. He believes that human suffering has the power to melt even the stoniest heart. He has shown great faith for it. He asserts that a change of heart is possible, otherwise non-co-operation (Satyagraha) is of no use.\textsuperscript{7} His Satyagraha did not aim at the change of the heart of the British people alone but it also sought the change of the heart of Indians as well. Non-co-operation or Satyagraha, says Gandhi, is a plea for a change of heart, not merely in the English but equally in ourselves and he expects the change first in the Indians and then as a matter of course in the English.\textsuperscript{8} The key to understand Gandhi’s concept of swaraj for the nation lies in understanding what he means by the change of the heart for English and for us as well.

The change of the heart of the British, according to Gandhi, does not simply consist in them realizing that their holding to India is unjust so they must leave it. As Ashis Nandy observes, in all his life, Gandhi sought to free the British rather than the Indians from the clutches of imperialism and the Brahminds rather than the untouchables from the caste system.\textsuperscript{9} He was not aiming at a mere overthrowing of the British imperial or colonial rule by non-violent methods. Rather he aims at an overcoming of imperialism and colonialism by changing the hearts of people. For him the change of heart of the British means making them realize by personal suffering how imperialism dehumanizes them and hence how it is equally important for the British too to overcome it.
When he was talking about the change of heart of the Indians, he was urging the Indian people to become capable of living together as a nation—a legitimate political community by adopting *swadeshi*, removal of untouchability and establishing inter and intra religious unity. This is how he defines his idea of *swaraj* or independence for the nation, which is a collective capacity to live together in peace and harmony. He writes in *Hind Swaraj* that it is *swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves and it is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. We will see in a following section of this paper on self-rule that, for Gandhi spiritual freedom of the individual or *moksha* is not something different from this. It will argue that being a *karmayogi* Gandhi believes that *moksha* or self-rule does not lie in an other-worldly metaphysical realm, but instead it lies in the nurturing capacity of the individual and the nation (praja) to organize their lives.

We find that he goes on to define *swaraj* in many ways according to different contexts but he keeps referring to this seminal idea of *swaraj* for the nation in different ways till the end of his life. For instance, on one occasion he affirms that we cannot have *swaraj* until we have made ourselves fit for it and on another occasion he observes that the key to *swaraj* lies in self-help. He further asserts the individual dimension of *swaraj* by stating that it has to be ‘experienced by each one for himself.’ Therefore, for Gandhi *swaraj* cannot be imposed on the people from above either by alien rule or
natives. He believed that independence or swaraj must begin at the bottom. Fred Dallmayr argues that, for Gandhi swaraj must first be nurtured, through education on the local or village level and then is to be encouraged to spread out into larger communities and the world through a series of oceanic circles. To sum up, for Gandhi swaraj for nation does not simply means ‘a collective freedom from alien rule’ but it means a collective capacity of any people to live together in harmony. According to him, to attain independence for the nation also means to nurture and strengthen this capacity in the individual to live together in peace and prosperity. Gandhi’s understanding for swaraj for the nation is based on the assumption that he rejects to understand national independence in terms of who is holding the government. For him since people constitute the nation, its independence must also be defined in terms of people’s condition. He writes in Hind Swaraj:

I believe that you want the millions of India to be happy, not that you want the reins of Government in your hands. If that be so, we have to consider only one thing: how can the millions obtain self-rule?

Political Freedom of the Individual
For Parel the second aspect of Gandhi’s notion of swaraj is political freedom of the individual. He argues that the individual political freedom is often defined in terms of ‘rights’ in the context of western modern politics and Gandhi too does the same. But Parel also believes that
this does not make Gandhi a rights theorist in the western sense of the term. He says that Gandhi’s defence of freedoms and rights is based on his view of human nature, which he borrows from Indian sources. He further adds that Gandhi has introduced two significant modifications into the theory of rights. First, he asserted that, however beneficial and necessary rights were to such well-being, they needed to be complemented by duty or dharma. Second, Gandhi made the process of securing rights in a less violent and more peaceful manner. Parel observes that this is what satyagraha is all about.

Gandhi’s contributions to the theory of rights by introducing the above mentioned modifications are well acknowledged by many scholars like Arvind Sharma, Beverley Birch and Michael Nicholson. But the more relevant question here is whether Gandhi really understood political freedom of the individual in terms of rights? Gandhi has not only articulated his idea of political freedom of swaraj for the individual on the basis of his views of human nature, which he has borrowed from the traditional Indian sources but also has rejected some basic assumptions of the western theory of rights. In this context, is it reasonable to argue that he has understood political freedom of the individual in terms of rights?

Many of the modern political liberal philosophers from Hobbes to Rawls assume that human beings are fundamentally brutal and destructive to one another in
the state of the nature. They hold that human coexistence is possible on the basis of implicit unstated contracts that define human relations and interactions. Therefore, for them rights are the most important means by which one defends one’s individual interests from other’s illegitimate interference. On the contrary, Gandhi’s understanding of individual political freedom is based on the assumption that man is not born to live in isolation but is essentially a social animal, independent and interdependent. Unlike the social-contract theorists he also believes that man’s nature is not essentially evil and he firmly believes in ‘the essential unity of men’. Here Gandhi largely depends upon the Advaita philosophy for his understanding of man and his place in the world in which the transcendental and metaphysical unity of human being is assumed. Since Gandhi’s understanding fundamentally defers from one of the basic assumptions of modern political philosophy that ‘humans by nature are brutal’ and ‘mankind is joined together by manmade contact’, it is difficult to accept that he understood that rights are the primary source of an individual’s political freedom. For Gandhi the true source of political freedom of the individual is duty, and not rights, because he believes that if we all discharge our duties, individual political freedom will not be far to seek. Along with the above mentioned conviction regarding human nature, Gandhi also believes that the individual is born with a set of indebtedness to the world and he becomes man only by recognizing his duty to others. Therefore, he sees duty as a binding factor of mankind and makes it the basis for
understanding political freedom of the individual as well as to develop his conception of good society.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Gandhi has nothing to say about the idea of rights. Gandhi does acknowledge the importance of individual’s rights in modern politics and he also introduces a unique method, which is characterised by uncompromising nonviolence in order to secure them. He however did not believe that they are the basic sources of individual’s political freedom. Indeed for Gandhi rights are just a licence to political freedom of the individual. Political freedom does not consist in a state of merely being free from some external obstacles in order to make choices in the situation in which the individual finds himself/herself. For him liberty is one thing, and licence is another. Gandhi acknowledges that many a time we confuse licence for liberty and lose the latter. License, according to him, leads one to selfishness whereas liberty guides one to supreme good. For him political freedom of the individual is more than just the absence of some external obstacles or barriers; it also requires the presence of something like self-determination and self-mastery. For Gandhi, it has to be necessarily achieved collectively. According to him individual political freedom can be best achieved through the participation in the process whereby one’s community exercises collective control over its own affairs to attain greatest good for all. By participating in the process whereby one’s community exercises collective control over itself does not mean that
the individual can achieve his/her political freedom by having right to vote to elect representative or having right to be elected as a representative. Here participation means ‘performing duty’ and therefore the individual can attain his/her political freedom only by performing his or her duties towards others. Therefore, for him swaraj as political freedom of the individual means participating in the process, by performing his/ her duty, whereby one’s community exercises collective control over its own affairs to attain greatest good for all.

**Economic Freedom of the Individual**

The third aspect of Gandhi’s notion of swaraj, according to Parel, is the economic freedom of the individual and it means freedom from poverty. Parel accepts that poverty is a relative phenomenon but he believes that Gandhi had his own criteria to judge whether a given society suffered from freedom-denying poverty. On Parel’s account, Gandhi’s criteria are as follows; first, the availability of the necessities of life (decent food, clothing, and dwelling), second the ability to enjoy the fruits of one’s toils, and third the opportunity for growth of the individual. He also believes that there is no essential contradiction between Gandhi’s acceptance of voluntary poverty and his attack on it because ‘it was not an approval, much less a glorification of involuntary poverty.’ There is no doubt that for Gandhi poverty is ‘a product of an unjust social order’ and is a great hindrance in the path to achieve freedom. He says that unless poverty and unemployment are wiped out from India, he
would not agree that we have attained freedom.\textsuperscript{24} It is also very easy to find many references from Gandhi’s writings to argue that his voluntary poverty cannot be seen as an approval of poverty. In his lecture titled “Does Economic Progress clash with Real Progress?” Gandhi himself has stated that “no one has ever suggested that grinding pauperism can lead to anything else than moral degradation.”\textsuperscript{25}

On the other hand, it is also a matter of serious consideration that, till his death he firmly believed that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognized that people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts and not in palaces.\textsuperscript{26} Once, while explaining what is one of the important aims of writing \textit{Hind Swaraj} he explains that, it was an attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, voluntary poverty and slowness.\textsuperscript{27} This understanding of Gandhi about poverty is based on his belief that poverty is man's natural condition. It means that, though Gandhi attacked the socially constructed poverty, yet he did not understand economic freedom of an individual or a nation merely a freedom from poverty. He was rather suggesting an overcoming of poverty, by adopting voluntary poverty, which consists in detachment and renunciation. We can see that Gandhi was obviously influenced here by the traditional Indian values of \textit{asteya} (non-stealing) and \textit{aparigraha} (non-possession)
Even if we look at his conception of economics, which is based on decentralized agrarian practices, human skills and trusteeship, we find that they neither aim at meeting certain economic conditions as a sign of economic development of the individual nor at abolishing economic inequalities among people. Parel also observed that if the above mentioned economic criteria are satisfied Gandhi was ready to tolerate ‘the existence of excessive differences between the rich and the poor’. Indeed Gandhi’s all economic reforms simply aim at making individual and community self-sufficient and self-contented. He was very critical about the modern western understanding of individual’s economic freedom in terms of meeting certain economic conditions and their belief that it can be achieved through more production and equal distribution. He strongly believed as observed by Ronald J. Terchek, that the problems cannot be overcome with more goods or even a more equitable distribution of goods. Therefore it is one thing to say that he attacks the socially constructed poverty to assure that every individual’s minimum economic needs have to be fulfilled and he had certain criteria to judge whether a given society provides conducive atmosphere to meet such needs, and another thing to say that he defines economic freedom of the individual or nation on the basis of certain economic conditions. He was concerned about the minimum economic requirements of individuals because he believes that these essential needs are not only the primary requirements for biological survival, but
also essential for man’s moral and spiritual development. A starving man, asserts Gandhi, cannot think of God.\textsuperscript{30}

Although Gandhi accepts that an individual’s minimum economic needs have to be met for his/her holistic development, he was not interested in defining economic freedom of the individual in terms of certain external economic conditions. Like any other aspect of his conception of \textit{swaraj}, the defining feature of Gandhi’s concept of economic freedom of the individual or nation is ‘man’ and not certain economic conditions. However for Gandhi the fulfilment of the minimum economic needs of an individual remains the prerequisite for defining economic freedom of an individual or a nation. Gandhi would prefer to define it for the individual or the nation in the way in which Ruskin has articulated it in his book \textit{Unto This Last}. The influence of Ruskin and his work on Gandhi is well known. In the chapter titled \textit{The Magic Spell of a Book} of his autobiography, he writes that “of these books, the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was \textit{Unto This Last}.” In his paraphrasing of \textit{Unto This Last} Gandhi writes

\begin{quote}
Therefore \textsc{There is no wealth but life}. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest
\end{quote}
helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.  

Similarly Gandhi would argue that economic freedom of an individual cannot be understood by establishing external standards that stipulate how much an individual should consume in order to attain economic freedom. On the contrary Gandhi would say that it makes an individual dependent on others. For Gandhi, therefore economic freedom of an individual means the ability to minimize one’s needs in order to be independent and to participate in economic activities of a community to make it self-sufficient and self-contained.

Self–Rule

On Parel’s account, the fourth and the most important aspect of Gandhi’s concept of swaraj is self-rule and it consists in the removal of the internal obstacles to freedom which is nothing but spiritual freedom. He further argues that, Gandhi derived the idea of spiritual freedom or self-rule from the Indian tradition, especially from the Bhagavad Gita, along with introducing a major conceptual change in it. Parel observes that though the notion of spiritual freedom in the Indian tradition was supposed to be an apolitical and an asocial state of affairs, requiring withdrawal from the socio-political world, Gandhi reinterpreted self-rule in such a way that he gave it not only a spiritual form, but also a social, political and economic profile. Though Parel acknowledges that all the four aspects of swaraj are
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harmoniously interconnected, his analysis distinguishes the first three from self-rule or spiritual freedom. He says that, the first three, in some respects, are negative in character, but freedom as self-rule, in contrast, is positive in character. Parel maintains such a distinction largely due to his belief that for Gandhi the idea of self-rule lies outside the realm of politics. He argues that, self-rule presupposes the agency of the spirit (individual atman) and observes that politics and political philosophy ought to recognise moksha or spiritual emancipation as the final end of all human striving, though politics per se is not the pursuit of moksha.

Gandhi obviously defines the idea of self-rule or moksha in religious and metaphysical terms and he says that what he wants to achieve is self-realization, to see God face to face, to see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face and to attain moksha. But as Bhikhu Parekh and Arne Naess have observed, there is good amount of pragmatism in Gandhi’s ideas about God, soul, moksha and many other metaphysical concepts. Parekh observes that Gandhi’s arguments for believing in the existence of the cosmic power contain a powerful pragmatic element, which too is characteristic of Hindu religious tradition.” Naess too elaborates Gandhi’s pragmatic approach in his essay, The Metaphysics of Satyagraha. It is also evident from Gandhi’s commentary on Gita that there is a pragmatic element in his idea of moksha; described in the metaphysical and religious vocabulary. In his Gita commentary he says that ”there is
violence even in the act of thinking, and so long as that is so man cannot attain a state of perfect self-realization, his mind cannot even comprehend such a state."35 Gita is not the only place where he accepted this ‘terrible truth’, as there are other numerous occasions where he accepts that, being a finite human being, man cannot understand infinity. In Gita, Gandhi draws a parallel between his above mentioned concept of moksha with Euclid’s straight line. About the latter he says that “Euclid has defined a straight line as having no breadth, but no one has yet succeeded in drawing such a line and no one ever will. Still we can progress in geometry only by postulating such a line.”36 Therefore in Gandhi’s philosophy the concept of moksha as described in metaphysical and religious vocabulary has strong pragmatic value; it is a source of inspiration for individual to live a disciplined and virtuous life for performing his duty (Nishkamakarma) for the welfare of all.

Nevertheless, in Gandhi’s philosophy the value of the concept of moksha/spiritual freedom (self-rule) is not confined to its pragmatic aspects. Gandhi, being a man of action, had a more profound understanding of moksha that can be practiced. His life testifies that he was neither an escapist nor a pessimist. In his interpretation of Gita he explains that man cannot attain complete self-realization in the sense of being one with God in his life, but this does not mean that man should voluntarily renounce activity and sit at home quietly, or commit suicide. On the contrary, Gandhi defines his concept of
moksha in very active terms. Gandhi writes in his commentary that, if we agree that man cannot attain moksha as it is defined above, we need not spend much thought or indulge in intellectual exercises over this problem. He added that we should rather concentrate on the means; if they are right, the end is as good as attained. Therefore, for Gandhi moksha is not an end that everyone can achieve. For him it is extremely important for us to adopt the means by which we pursue it – the continuous effort to live a complete non-violent life. He says that swaraj (moksha) consists in our effort to win it.

Two things are essential for putting efforts to live a complete non-violent life. The first is self-purification, understood as controlling the senses or removing the internal obstacles or living virtues and disciplined life. Gandhi would argue that creating a sense of detachment by controlling senses and by living a disciplined and virtuous life is not enough to live a complete non-violent life because the very existence of the body depends on karma (action) and every action without exception involves violence. Now the question is; how to escape from all karmas in order to live a complete non-violent life? Gandhi says that, there is no escape from karma. For him body means karma and karma means body and both are violent without any exception. But he says that an action done with the spirit of yajna—for the benefit of others—is ahimsa or non-violent act. Then the second essential thing to lead a complete non-violent life,
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according to Gandhi, is performing selfless action with the sole intention of serving others; Gandhi called it *Niskamakarma*. It simply means Gandhi’s concept of *moksha* or self-rule is the inevitable link with the socio-political activities and its sense cannot be grasped by segregating them. As Gandhi explains, “if a man seeks *moksha* and still believes that he is independent, he will utterly fail in his aspiration. One who seeks *moksha* behaves as society’s servant.”39 Thus there can be no divorce between Gandhi’s first three aspects of *swaraj* and self-rule. In other words for Gandhi self-rule or *moksha* does not lie outside the realm of politics but is the very ability to act well in the socio-economic-political arena.

Concluding Remarks

Though we have critically engaged with Anthony J. Parel’s essay “Gandhian freedoms and self-rule”, our primary purpose was to show the integrity of Gandhi’s idea of *Swaraj*. We tried to demonstrate this by two ways. First, by rejecting the distinction made by Parel between the first three aspect of *swaraj* and self-rule. We have seen that, within Gandhi’s framework, such a distinction is not possible as for him *moksha* or self-rule does not lie in the metaphysical realm. For Gandhi self-rule consists in the ability to act well in the socio-economic-political arena. Secondly, we have seen that though Gandhi uses different expressions like independence of nation, political freedom of individual, economic freedom of individual and self-rule to communicate his idea of *swaraj*
in different contexts, for him they are fundamentally not different from each other. We may rather see that all these four aspects of Gandhi’s idea of swaraj are the different ways in which one can express Gandhi’s fundamental notion of swaraj, which can be broadly understood as a capacity of self-organising/regulating life/lives, which is equally applicable to the individual and to the nation.

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