

India's "Truths": Criticism Across Borders for an Alter-Post-Colonialism¹

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"Big countries will have to sit and bargain with us. We do not need lessons from them. In fact, we can teach them."
Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil,
in *Business Standard*²

I

Even as the largest conference of English Teachers in South America gathers in Belo Horizonte, the President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is on an official visit to India. The quotation just cited, thus, comes at a most opportune time because it addresses the key theme of my paper, which is how to reduce if not bypass Anglo-American (or more generally Western) dominance of literary studies. The challenge, as I see it, is to

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² <http://www.business-standard.com/common/storypage.php?autono=286700&leftnm=3&subLeft=0&chkFlg>; accessed on 4 June 2007.

examine what resources can come from India for such a project. And inherent to this is the task actually of constructing and re-interpreting India, which I propose to do here. But this a project by its very nature has to be “unfinished,” tentative both its substance and structure, despite the apparent assertiveness of the title.

One of the pressing challenges that we face as teachers of language and literature today is work towards the possibility of a different world order, not just in the political and economic spheres, which are probably not our direct concern, but certainly in the intellectual, cultural, and linguistic spheres. The imperative is to come together in solidarity in order to oppose the dominance of Western, more specifically Anglo-American, modes of theorizing, thinking, teaching, and being. To me this coming together must be direct, without the mediation of the metropolis. Ideas need to circulate in a more straightforward manner, not deviated through Western print capitalism or academic institutions. Alter-post-coloniality can be created only through such enabling exchanges between, for instance, Indians and Brazilians, among others.

We might pause to ask, what is wrong with the dominant? Each of us will have his or her answers to this based on the lived experience. I would venture to assert that whether we live in the metropolis, like Jonah in the belly of the beast, or outside it, in the periphery or semi-periphery, we have all felt the discomfort of this dominance. Asymmetrical power relations produce both distress and resistance. Regimes of power, as the native American critic Ward Churchill once said, produce either “good” or “bad” subjects. The former are maintained and rewarded, the latter pacified or eliminated. But as Churchill says, the challenge is really to be “non-subjects,” to get on with our own narratives and concerns, without being threatened with cooptation or extermination. This is the challenge of *svaraj*³, or self-rule, self-realization, self-governance, self-illumination—or of liberty, equality and fraternity, as the European Enlightenment chose

³ An ancient Sanskrit word, “svaraj” was resurrected during India’s freedom struggle by nationalist stalwarts like Dadabhai Naoroji, Lokmanya Tilak, and Mahatma Gandhi to mean independence and self-rule. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1909) is a classic text of non-violent revolution.

to phrase it. The two are not identical, as I will endeavour to show, but they do suggest a convergence of directions and pursuits.

The imbalances in our world are not just literary, but linguistic. On the one hand, each day many languages on this planet are dying, while certain languages, especially English, are gaining in power and importance. It would seem that though the British Empire has perished, the empire of the English language is imperishable. Where I come from, that is India, many upper class children have forgotten their mother-tongues. With the loss of language, there is a great loss of culture too. Urban upper class Indians know very little about their own country. If they were asked to explain a poem, a song, or a painting that is more than 200 years old, many of them would be at a total loss. When I was last in China, two years back, I was amazed to find that the cultural memory of most the young Chinese students was just fifteen or twenty years. They knew so little even of their parents' struggles or about the Cultural Revolution, let alone of "the great leap forward." Most of the students I talked to in Guangzhou University had not even read Marx or Mao. I don't know if this is good or bad—but, more seriously, it seems as if global cultural patrimony is shrinking. Like amnesia or aphasia, these losses are serious for us because with them we also lose the wisdom of our ancestors.

Indeed, the primary focus of my paper is this wisdom of India, which I try to reinterpret for our own purposes. More specifically, what India has to offer in this common challenge that faces us. I call these resources "India's Truths." I must clarify at the outset that the India that I bring to you today is quite different from what you might expect if you are post-colonial critics or scholars, at least from the usual manner in which India is represented in the literature and discourse. This "other" India is, however, always present to those who have sought it, alongside, beneath, sometimes within the more familiar India of diasporic writers and theorists. The uncanny persistence of this India is what I would like to talk about. This is not the stereotypical "timeless" or "eternal" India, though I do wish to invoke the resonance of *sanatan dharma*⁴, or the

⁴ This phrase has been used to describe Hinduism itself, but actually means "the perennial way." I use it more in the latter sense.

perennial path. This India is very specifically locatable in history because it responded to specific demands of history. That is why I think it can speak to our own demand today to work for a different theoretical, pedagogical and cultural paradigm that is free from the distorting dominance of Western thought. I would like to invoke the India of Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, to mention two names, rather than the India of Salman Rushdie or Arundhati Roy. Not that these two Indias are separate, but we usual forget the one because we are so focused on the other.

Let me briefly revert to the title now. It is very far from my intention to suggest that there is one truth or set of truths about India. There are many truths about India and there are many paths to these truths. In fact, in a book that I wrote in 1993, which is called *Decolonisation and Development: Hind Swaraj Revisited*, I have a chapter called “Defining India,” where I say is that if we want to understand our place in the world, first we have to define who we are. One way to define India is by positing that it offers a culture of plural possibilities, but also a culture with certain emphases. This is how we might negotiate the problem of essentialism, because if you say India has one truth, then you’re going against the basic premise of India being a plural space, the basic concept that was enshrined in the Rig Veda, “*Satyam eka, vipram bahuda vadanti*,” truth is one; the wise call it by many names.

Theoretically, this is an interesting paradigm, because it does not lead to relativism, where you can have many views with the same ontological or metaphysical status, which is the case with the modern world. Granted that the modern world is plural to some extent, but, at the same time, its matrix is marked by radical singularity. For example, you have a choice to use any toothpaste that you want, but not the choice to use a twig to clean your teeth. At the level of the toothpaste, all the brands have the same status, as equally valid choices, aside from what the advertisements say, but not to use toothpaste at all, that choice is forbidden. In India, on the other hand, the unity of truth is accepted. The truth is not entirely, endlessly, infinitely plural, like the post-modernists would sometimes argue. That is an anti-foundationalist position, but anti-foundationalism becomes what I call pseudo-foundationalism because when you de-centre the centre, you are creating a centre of another kind, a pseudo-centre, if you will—something that stands for and does the work of a centre. The unity

of truth is accepted in India, but this unity is itself constituted as a field of difference, of plurality, diversity, and endless possibilities.

So India is a place where you have plural possibilities, but with certain emphases, and I think this is how we can reconcile the question of whether there are any special truths that India has to espouse. No doubt, India can espouse many, many truths, but yet, among these many truths, some are perhaps more fundamental, suggesting a certain cultural orientation, civilisational enterprise, or even national responsibility. India is not a nation state, but a civilisational state, and a civilisational state must, in some ways, espouse and uphold certain values. To bear the responsibility, to bear the burden, to bear the obligation of Dharma is what India must stand for—at any rate, this is what I propose.

I would like to venture one more thing that post-colonial theory does not touch upon, which is how the foundational ideas of nations, cultures and civilizations are established. It seems to me that nations or civilizations have essentially two kinds of founders—conquistadors and sages. Most nations are founded on conquest—the so-called distinction between settler colonies, such as Brazil or invader colonies such as India is only technical when it comes to this. The fact is that both colonies were created through conquest. The conquest paradigm is thus the most common in history. Tribal societies, indigenous societies, of course, are not products of conquest. They trace their ancestry to mythical animals, birds, and natural causes. However, among established, post-indigenous cultures, conquest is the common factor. The United States, for instance, was founded upon the conquest and genocide of indigenous people even though its constitutional ideas came from the European Enlightenment. Most Islamic societies are also based on conquest and conversion.

In India, however, we believe that our society is based on the precepts of rishis or the ancient seers. Each clan and caste, to this day, traces its descent to some rishi or sage in the mythic times. These sages were considered more significant than kings. The kings, whether elected or preferred by birth, were merely considered administrators, the keepers and protectors of Dharma. The real founders of the society were the sages, those enlightened beings, who were also our ancient legislators. Even today, we might argue that modern India is formed by rishis such as Gandhi and Aurobindo, not by Presidents and Prime Ministers. I am mixing the mythical with the historical to maintain this *rishi parampara*

or wisdom tradition, which I believe to be my duty. To me this move is like the indigenous people's respect of their ancestors. If India is not a gladiatorial culture like the Romans were or the modern West is, if it is indeed a culture of yogis and *rishis*, we must remember the debt we owe to these *rishis*. That is why in this very paper, I have invoked the memory of Gandhi, Aurobindo, and Raja Rao, to name three examples.

It was Sri Aurobindo who provided a different basis for Indian nationalism than the civic nationalism of France or the romantic nationalism of Germany. After all, unlike European nations, India did not have the common glue of one language, religion, or ethnicity. Even Brazil, which is very diverse ethnically, has one language to bind it. Aurobindo proposed a "Dharmic nationalism" for India. He said that each nation has a soul or spirit, which it was uniquely blessed with and especially qualified to express. For India, this was Dharma. Without Dharma, India is nothing. As Aurobindo put it, "She does not rise as other countries do, for self, or when she is strong, to trample the weak. She is rising to shed the eternal light, entrusted to her over the world. India has always existed for humanity and not for herself, and it is for humanity and not for herself that she must be great."

I am sharing these ideas to because they are not usually found in post-colonial studies. One of the difficulties with the discipline is that it is constituted as an exclusively secular enterprise, indeed, Edward Said himself says so. But, as we know only too well, we may banish the religious, but it returns to haunt us, sometimes as our worst nightmare. That is why Jacques Derrida in his last writings called for a return of the sacred. Post-secular academics must engage with the sacred, not only in its pathological form, which is fanatical and violent, but in its benign and inspiring form, which is spiritual and nourishing. It is of this sacred India that I speak.

II

I would now like to shift my focus to something that is more literary—actually, to tell a story. This is a well-known story in India, occurring earlier in the Mahabharata, but immortalized by India's most famous classical poet, Kalidasa. In passing I wish to make the point that stories in India are always re-told, which makes no one version of them

authoritative. This story has also been retold many times—there are even studies about the implications of these retellings—but I think I would like to regard it as a story of India, of one of its ordinary myths, this story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. The first thing to remember is that above all, it is very much a love story, and it might be described as a story of found, lost and found love. So the story of India is also a story of love.

Now why is this the story of India? The conventional answer is that from the union of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is born the child, the boy Bharata, after whom—according to one of the theories—India got its pre-British and pre-Islamic name, Bharatavarsha. Even today, the linguistic Hindi equivalent for constitutional appellation “Republic of India” is “Bharat Ganarajya.”

The story of Dushyanta and Shakunta starts with the king going on a hunting expedition. Chasing his quarry, he approaches a hermitage, the hermitage of the Rishi Kanva. Kalidas, who is such a great poet, talks about how the horses are themselves inflamed by the closeness of the game. The hunt is on, the king's sinews are taut, and he is about to release the arrow. Just then a young renunciate, a novice, from the ashram stands in the way of the king: “O King, stop, because this is a protected animal, this deer belongs to the hermitage of Rishi Kanva.” The king immediately gives the command to rein in the horses. Kalidas tells you that the horses are actually disappointed because they were so keen to go through with the hunt, sensing how close to the deer they were. The reigning in of galloping horses is, of course, a metaphor for the superior man's control of his own senses and passion, which can draw him away from his true nature. The king shows his mettle through his capacity for restraint.

Then this young hermit says, “Well done. You have acted as befits the house of Puru; you are supposed to be the protector of the weak, and this defenseless deer, which is running for its life, shouldn't be killed for sport. In any case, it is not a wild animal, but belongs to the hermitage.” The King is taught *rajadharma*, the duty of Kings, by the forest-dwelling hermit.

Now to fast-forward, the king gets down, goes to the ashram where he meets the enchanting and utterly virginal Shakuntala, they fall in love, and have a Gandharva Vivaha, a kind of love marriage. Interestingly, more than 80% of the marriages in India are still arranged, but in that ancient story, the progenitors of the nation go through a simple and secret marriage

by a simple exchange of garlands, with the moon and stars as witness. Dushyanta goes away, promising to send for his wife later. Shakuntala is listless, thinking of her beloved husband, when the very short-tempered rishi, Durvasa, comes to the hermitage. So immersed is Shakuntala in anguished love, that she neglects her duties to the distinguished guest, who promptly curses her: "He whom you are thinking of now will forget you, as you have forgotten your obligations and duties to your guests."

What a crisis! When her companions hear of it, they rush to the aid of Shakuntala, pleading with the sage to revoke it. But that is impossible; the words of a sage have to come true. Mollified, perhaps by a good meal and some warm hospitality, the sage offers to mitigate the effects of the curse. "If you show him something that he has given you, he will remember who you are again." As the story proceeds, we find that Dhushyant does not send for his wife and poor Shakuntala, in the meanwhile, finds out that she is pregnant. So she decides to go to the court of the king to present herself to him.

On the way to the palace, while bathing in the river, she loses the ring that the king had given her. The city, with its palaces and bazaars, is a different world from the sylvan hermitage where nature is itself as yet unfallen. Here, money and power rule human relations. When she announces herself to the King, he says, "Woman, I don't know you." In the skeleton story in the Mahabharata, Shakuntala's response is much more spirited. But in Kalidasa, she is much more delicate, thus a figure of pity. Her escorts from the ashram also leave, saying the matter is now between her and her husband. The King, owing to Durvasa's curse, has forgotten who Shakuntala is. Alone and abandoned, she goes away, bearing the king's child, unbeknownst to him.

After her departure, Dushyanta is extremely sad. He doesn't know why. I think this is one of the tragedies of the human condition that somewhere in our hearts is a yearning, a quest, for something much deeper than our mundane, material reality, and we don't know what it is that our heart really craves for. Dushyanta too cannot find any solace in the pleasures of his palace. Several days pass, but he is unable to fathom the mystery of his melancholy.

Then, (un)luckily for him, the ring is restored; a fish in the river swallowed it; a fisherman found it after cutting open the fish; the King's guard's arrested the fisherman trying to sell the royal signet. So the ring is

the mnemonic device which reminds him of his lost beloved. Now his mourning has a cause and thus probably worse than the earlier sense of unknown loss.

Some years pass. The King is invited to fight for Indra, the King of the Gods, because there's a war going on between the Gods and the demons. The Gods win, with the help of humans, which I think is also interesting for us. Dushyanta is sent back from heaven to earth in a winged chariot, flying first class, you see, and stops off at another hermitage, that of Maricha Rishi. There he sees a fearless lad playing with lion cubs. He picks up the child much to the consternation of the on-lookers, asks, "Whose son are you?" The child resists and says, "Don't touch me; my father is the King and no one else can pick me up." The boy's words come true as the inmates of the ashram rush out to find Shakuntala's long-separated husband come back. The boy is Bharata. He grows up to be a great king and gives India its traditional name.

Now I come to the crux of the story: there are two journeys to two hermitages in *Shakuntala*. The first is to the hermitage of Kanva Rishi and takes Dushyanth to Shakuntala. The second takes Dushyanth to the hermitage of Marich Rishi and restores his child and, as it were, his lost love and wife back to him. The two journeys, to me, are symbolic, as also the two chariots in which they occur. The first chariot is earth-bound; in it the king almost kills an innocent deer for his pleasure and later finds, marries, and abandons his love, Shakuntala. This journey results in brief happiness, but long desolation. The second chariot is actually a heavenly vehicle, the golden chariot of the Gods in which Dushyanth comes back to earth from the sky-realm. It is this chariot that restores his wife and child back to him.

I have a brief quotation from a very lovely modern edition of *Shakuntala*, which I recommend. Called *Shakuntala, or the Ring of Remembrance*, published by Auroville Press, it is a very small book, just a hundred pages, actually retold from Sanskrit to French, and then it has been translated, or adapted into English, by Roger Harris. Here's the quotation: "Love born in the paradise of childhood and innocence is regained, transmuted, and magnificently widened in another paradise that one could call divine. As there are two chariots, a terrestrial and a heavenly one, so there are two journeys, one, through the forest that leads the king

to a world of marvelous purity, and the other through the regions of the sky, that brings him to a universe of light. From the union of the two is born Bharat, the support of the world.” So here we have the first meaning of India, to support, which is one of the roots of the word Bharat—in modern Indian languages, *bhar* means weight, that which is borne. That is why I spoke earlier about India’s responsibility.

As Gandhi said in a speech to Indian Christians in 1925, two decades before independence,

I call myself a nationalist and I pride myself in it. My nationalism is as broad as the universe. It includes in its sweep even the lower animals. It includes in its sweep all the nations of the earth, and if I possibly could convince the whole of India of the truth of this message, then, India would be something to the whole world for which the world is longing. My nationalism includes the well-being of the whole world. I do not want my India to rise on the ashes of other nations. I do not want India to exploit a single human being. I want India to become strong in order that she can infect the other nations also with her strength. (*Collected Works* 32: 247-48)

Or as Sri Aurobindo put it more succinctly in his famous Uttarpara speech in 1909, “It is for the Dharma and by the Dharma that India exists.”⁵

To draw some morals from the story, I would like to reiterate that the idea of India is born out of love, not out of hate, not out of war, not out of an opposition to anyone or anything, even to the British. The second important thing is that it is born out of the union of the earthly and the divine. Shakuntala, herself, the mother of Bharat is the daughter of an earthly sage, Visvamitra, a warrior who then becomes a man of religious power, and a heavenly damsel, Menaka. Hence I have tried to show how two journeys, two chariots, two aspirations, two forces come together to produce the child, Bharat.

For the more esoteric meaning of Bharat, we must go to the other root of the word, *bb*. It means to shine, to shed light. Thus you get one of the words for the sun, Bhasker, he who creates light. So India is that which gives light, which illumines. When we ask what is the responsibility of

⁵ <http://intyoga.online.fr/uttaspch.htm>.

India, what is its *svadharma*, then we must accept the fact that it is to illumine, to give light. But what kind of light should India give?

To answer this question, we might look at the material conditions of India right now—the growing population, the rapid pace of change, the economic expansion, and the technological advances—India is actually living out what Alvin Toffler called *Future Shock*. Coping with the pace of change has now become so difficult that it's become a psychological or cognitive challenge to most Indians. Sometimes we understand what's happening around, and sometimes we don't. For instance, in conversations with my mother about the city she lives in, she says to me, "I'm so bewildered by Bangalore, I can't recognize this road, there was no flyover here, I used to turn left here but now it's become a one-way." To me this symptomizes a deeper sense of disorientation, or dislocation, that we experience in India. We are at home, but we are not at home any more, because home has changed so much.

Given these challenges, what is it that India stands for? Here I would refer you to another book, which, though by an important post-colonial author, has not been read very much. It is called *The Meaning of India*, by Raja Rao. Rao, who died last year at the age of ninety-eight was the author of pioneering and far-reaching novels such as *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*. In *The Meaning of India* (1998) he says that India is not a *desa*, it is a *darsana*. *Desa* means country or nation, while *darsana* means a way of seeing, a vision, a perspective, or a philosophy. According to Raja Rao, India is not a country, but a vision, a way of viewing. With due respects and apologies, I would modify that statement to say that India is both a *desa* and a *darsana*, both a country and a point of view—because a *darsana* cannot exist without a *desa*—even a revelation needs a form, local habitation, and a name. Just as our consciousness is embodied, every perspective too is housed, grounded, located. This locus is a part of our reality. So, just as it would be an error to say that we are nothing but our bodies, to say that our bodies are our entirety—that is, we are nothing other than our bodies—it would also be an error to say we are not our bodies. India too, though it cannot be confined to its geographical location, cannot be totally removed from that location either.

Just as we are not merely our bodies, but we are our bodies too, similarly, the vision that India offers is not merely confined to India, but is also located in India. This vision, this *darsana*, is available to the whole

world. So ultimately, India is an invitation—it invites you to consider reality from a certain perspective, and that reality is not exclusive to India. Though few people have interpreted it in this manner, E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* also makes a similar point. The architecture of the book suggests affirmation, negation, and transcendence, corresponding to the three sections, Mosque, Caves, and Temple. Whatever else it may be, and it is a lot else including a social and political book, *Passage to India* is also a deeply spiritual book. It is this aspect that the post-colonial critics and scholars have neglected. The other Anglo-India classic, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, which is an earlier book than Forster's, and usually read as the quintessential imperial text, is also, as it happens, a deeply spiritual book. Parallel to the great game, which is a metaphor for empire, is wheel of law, the greater game of karma and reincarnation from which both the Lama, Kim's putative father, and Kim seek release. *Kim* ends not on the grand trunk road where the game of empire is played, but far away and high above the bustle of power and pelf, in the Himalayan foothills where the Lama finds his sacred river and where Kim too, through his selfless service, finds his redemption. While the two games are indeed related, even intertwined, Kipling seems to suggest that the real game is spiritual, not political. It is here that a marriage of East and West is also suggested in the novel by the author whose most quoted statement is "never the twain shall meet." In an audacious metamorphosis, the sub-plot flips into the main plot, while the imperial capers with which the novel began are rendered secondary. Whatever else it may be, India remains deeply spiritual, Kipling seems to suggest.

There is the danger that my argument may be leading towards an Indian exceptionalism. Just as American exceptionalism is not always a good thing, I would agree that Indian exceptionalism may not be a good thing. This has been the tendency of some proponents of Hindutva, of right-wing Hindu nationalism. Similarly, there are those who hold that India is the greatest country with the greatest culture and the Vedas, the sacred books of the Hindus, hold all the wisdom in the world, and all that is glorious and great and wonderful has already been spoken of or written in our tradition. These are ridiculous claims, not taken seriously even by those who make them. But because there are these dangers and drawbacks, we cannot altogether turn our backs to what India has to offer.

III

So, in this last section of my paper, I want to try to offer my view of the “truths” that India espouses. These may be, to some extent, idealizations, but that does not mean that they have no basis in reality or history. I would like to organize my points in three ways: the metaphysical, the political, and the cultural. This is not a closed, but an expanding set, to which we can add other elements. Indeed the “truths” of India can be harnessed to many domains. It is for us to work out precisely how they apply in the realm of an alter-globalization and a new world intellectual order. I intend to offer a replicable methodology.

So let me start by trying to define India's truth in the domain of metaphysics. Raja Rao in *The Meaning of India* calls this truth non-dualism. I tend to agree. There may be controversies about non-dualism or with the Sanskrit word, *advaita*, which also refers to a particular branch of Indian philosophy. But I would like to use the term in a wider fashion as a way to overcome binaries, dialectics, linearity, dualism, and so on. Non-dualism is different from monism—as it is from dualism. Most people do not understand this. It is not the opposite of dualism or something which denies difference. The word is a negative, like de-colonization, implying non-something. That something, in this case, “dualism,” exists within it. Duality, the separation between you and me or subject and object, seems to be the basis of our daily life. To deny it in a simple-minded manner would be futile. Is dualism, however, true ultimately? If it were, then our history of wrong-doing would be justified because we are doing these things to others, free from the consequences ourselves. But that is impossible. It is like destroying the earth believing that it will not affect us. Dualism allows us to treat others instrumentally, thus going against both the golden rule and Kant's categorical imperative. Dualism, ultimately speaking, is violent. Non-dualism, on the other hand, enjoins upon us to treat others responsibly because there are no others; everyone one is our self, different versions of our self. Non-dualism recognizes two or three or more, but denies that these are separate or unconnected. It allows both identity and plurality without creating a division between them. Ultimately, as compound word, it suggests something beyond itself.

After metaphysical non-dualism, let me come to its political equivalent. In political terms, I would call it *svaraj*, going back to Gandhi.

What is this word *svaraj*? It is a very old word, but comes into the vocabulary of modern India in the nineteenth century. When the struggle for freedom started acquiring a certain momentum, people like Dadabhai Naoroji used the word *svaraj*. Lokmanya Tilak used the word *svaraj*, Sri Aurobindo used the word *svaraj*, and of course, Gandhi used the word *svaraj*—he wrote a book, *Hind Swaraj*, 1909. All of them used the word to signify political independence from the British. But etymologically, the word means much more than that. Actually *svaraj* is a “corruption” of the Sanskrit word *sva-rajya*, which was an abstract noun. When applied to a single individual, the word was *svarat*, an adjective. It is a word that occurs many times in the Upanishads in the Chandogya, in the Taittiriya, and in the Maitri Upanishads.

But what is this *svarajya* and who is *svarat*? It is a compound word *sva + raj*; *sva* means self and *raj*, means to shine. Hence the word means both the shining of the self and the self that shines. The word *raj* gives us many words associated with power including *Raja*, *Rex* and *Regina*. The root, *raj*, suggests to shine—“*raj deepnoti*,” that is why the word for silver is *rajat*, because it shines. The light metaphor is very important in the Vedas because it suggests the sun of higher consciousness—*Tat savitur verenyam*, of the Gayatri mantra, a metaphor used in both Islamic traditions as in Rumi, and in Christians traditions as in Dante. It is to that sun, *savitur*, that Sri Aurobindo refers to in his great poem, *Savitri*. So *svarat* is a self-luminous person, and *svarajya* is a state of being *svarat* or enlightened. You might actually say that *svaraj* is another word for enlightenment.

It is in India that political independence was expressed in terms of enlightenment, self-illumination, not necessarily in opposition to the colonizers or imperialists. *Svarajya*, then, is the principle of perfection, of perfect governmentality, because illumination comes from internal order, not from oppression. Originally, *svrajya* referred to the internal government of a person, the government of the limbs, and of the senses, of the organs, all the different constituents of the individual. When that is well-governed, a person who can rule himself is a *svarat*. So *svarajya* is self-rule or self-governance.

But what of the *sva*, the same root as the western *sui*? Self-rule also means the rule of that self—but which self? The Id, the ego, or the superego, to use the Freudian set? In traditional Indian psychology, unlike in Freud,

there was not only the unconscious self, but also the super-conscious. That is in each of us, the higher self, the divine self. So svaraj would be the rule of that self within us. Svarajya is the state of self-mastery; the master of senses is svarat. He or she is nothing less than the yogi perfectly poised in himself or herself. What is the opposite of svarat? It is *anyarat*—*anya*, other, ruled by others. These others could be the British or the Americans or even our own internal demons. The Upanishad clearly says that those who are *anyarat* perish; they go to the worlds that perish. This is the smoky path of the night that leads to repeated births, while svrajya is that luminous path or state where there is no return.

Synonymous with liberty, freedom, and independence, svaraj also suggests a host of possibilities for inner illumination and self-realization. I prefer the word svaraj to de-colonization because svaraj is not against anyone else. One's own svaraj can only help others and contribute to the svaraj of others. In svaraj the personal and the political merge, one leading to the other, the other leading back to the one; I cannot be free unless all my brothers and sisters are free and they cannot be free unless I am free. Svaraj allows you to resist oppression without hatred and violent opposition. Gandhi developed the praxis of satyagraha or insistence on truth or truth-force to fight for the rights of the disarmed and impoverished people of India.

The svarat is a person who has good government of his own body or good self-government. Gandhi and the others applied it to the body politic. Simply speaking, we do not want to be ruled by others. This also means we should not try to rule others. Svaraj also means self-restraint, self-regulation. If we are all self-governing, the state as we know it will wither away. For Gandhi, an ideal society consisted of highly evolved, self-regulating individuals, who respected themselves and the others. Such a society did not need policemen or law enforcers because each citizen was looking out for the welfare of others.

So, politically what India stands for is *svaraj*, even if we cannot always practice it. There is a deep quest in the Indian political psyche for autonomy. We do not want to be part of an American narrative, European narrative or a Chinese narrative. We respect their narratives; they can pursue their own narratives, but we want to be left free to pursue ours. Whatever our civilizational narrative is, we want the autonomy and the freedom to pursue that. If we become powerful we do not want to oppress others and force them to pursue our narrative. That is svaraj.

Svaraj means not to rule others, as I said earlier. One of the clichés about India is that no matter how powerful the country was, it did not send expeditions of conquerors to countries outside this peninsula, huge armies being sent here and there to conquer and colonize, to bring the loot back from these expeditions. This is how the Arabs, Turks, the Persians, the Afghans, the Portuguese, British, Dutch, French and the others behaved, coming to India to conquer and plunder, but there is no record of Indian armies doing the same. There are no narratives of Indians bringing back loot from China, and from Egypt, and from Tibet, and from Champa, and from Indonesia and from Malaysia, sending huge ships and bringing back wealth, or land expeditions, camels laden with gold—no, we don't have those narratives. There was a large sphere of Indian influence, but most of it was not through armed conquest, but cultural osmosis and exchange. So the historical record of India does not show a desire to go and rule other people, to enforce our will on others, to trample them, to exploit them economically, to oppress them, to crush them—that is not the Indian way, in my opinion.

But, by the same token, to be ruled by others is also unacceptable to us, and we will struggle against it. Throughout Indian history, the struggle for svaraj has gone on. We have records of villagers protesting against emperors, blocking roads, refusing to pay taxes, fasting, and so on. In the 150 years of British rule, there was a revolt every single year in India. Some part or the other was always up in arms against British rule. So Pax Britannica was a great illusion. There was no Pax Britannica, because if you are an imperialistic power, you are ruling with the force of arms. Can you have peace in Iraq, where every day there is a car bomb? For peace, you need svaraj.

So svaraj is a political ideal, which comes from a deep spiritual ideal, resurrected during India's freedom struggle, defined and re-deployed by great Indian thinkers like Aurobindo and Gandhi. Writing in 1946, a year before independence, in his paper, *Harijan*, Gandhi outlined his vision of a good society:

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the

latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it. (*Complete Works* 91: 326)

In Gandhi's model of oceanic circles we have a way of relating which is very different from the pyramidal. In the latter, you have a few people on top ruling the rest; as you go higher and higher, the number is smaller and smaller, until at the very top, you have only one person. In Gandhi's model the individual is the centre of the oceanic circle, but continually expands his world to include his family, his neighbourhood, his village, his state, his country, and so on. What is wonderful is that Gandhi allows each person to be the centre of his or her cosmos, but such a centre that wishes to expand and include. So the self in *svaraj* is not a limited but an expanding, potentially unlimited self, which can stretch to embrace the whole cosmos. Ultimately, the self alone is; there is no other. The Gandhian model is not one of conflict, but of cooperation. Progress does not necessary come through clashes of opposites as in Hegelian and Marxian praxis.

Finally, to the cultural realm. Here I would suggest the counterpart of metaphysical non-dualism as being non-exclusion. The principle is not to exclude. Again, non-exclusionism is different from inclusionism, because we cannot include everybody. That is an ideal, a myth. Some people will always be excluded; inclusion is a mask, a boast, a deception. The rich and powerful rule in the name of being inclusive. When the marginalized protest, some scraps of privilege are thrown to them to keep them quiet. Non-exclusionism, on the other hand, tries to create a just social order by refusing to consider exclusive entitlements to power or prestige. Theoretically, no one will be excluded; practically, some people may still be left out, however. If this is the case, you have refine the system or even make special attempts to include them. But non-exclusion implies the humility to know that we are not perfectly just, but that we would try to be so. It also saves us from the trap of political correctness. If you claim to be inclusive, on the other hand, you end up with a tokenism. This tokenism camouflages a more flagrant kind of inequality as in many so

called advanced countries. Look at the U.S., where they are proud to be inclusive, or Canada, where multiculturalism is a state policy. But when I go there I find there is no place for me. If I complain, they say, "Show us where a law is being violated." I reply, it's not a matter of law, it's how you have designed your societies. They are exclusive from start to finish; because you have realized that that is unfair, you now try to include the others. The principle of exclusion has not ended, but is sought to be mitigated by tokenism. Once the quota is filled, the society remains as exclusive, racist, or oligarchic as ever. My question is if we can devise systems which are non-exclusive to begin with. Then no special inclusiveness will be needed.

So, the point is that it is more important not to have closure than to include every single number in a system. Reality cannot be exhausted numerically. In India, there is no alpha point or omega point, no point of origin or conclusion. No single book, God, or prophet, no one dogma or church, no one belief system or dictator. It is an open system, bounded by certain precepts, like a mandala. So even if you say everything starts with the big bang that is not Sanatani, the Indian would say what happened before the big bang? One of the creation hymns of the Rg Veda asks precisely such a question. It's answer the creator of the system knows or, perhaps, even he doesn't know. That is why Raja Rao said India has no enemies, only adversaries. And today's adversary will be tomorrow's friend. As I keep saying, yesterday's *asura* can become today's *deva*.

Conclusion

I have tried to share these "truths" from India not because I believe that they are exclusive to India but because I believe they are a beautiful part of the heritage of humankind. It is for this reason that they should not be lost. The third way that India shows, to be neither the oppressor nor the oppressed, is not necessarily like Homi Bhabha's third space, which is between nations, interstitial and liminal. The third way of India is an alternative way of living and being, not always tied to power, to imperialism or its opposite. When we look at the world today, we see two clearly identifiable forces, at least in the political arena. There is US imperialism and in opposition to it is a kind of jihadism. One is systemic, the other

counter-systemic. Similarly, there is the force of globalization and then there are the anti-globalizers. But the third way would be something different than both the options, not locked into the dominant either as an ally or as an adversary.

The dominant forms of post-colonialism, which are located in the West, do not offer this space. They are a part of the Western narrative, however critically so from the inside. I think that it is countries like Brazil and India that should show the way by realizing the third way. We have to show viable social and intellectual systems which neither reproduce the contradictions of the dominant nor are at war with the dominant. Our countries and societies are large and vibrant. The non-Western world is actually the majority. But much of this world consists of failed states and unviable systems. They cannot provide the alternative. That is why it is left to some of us to do so.

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