

Swaraj at 70: The concept of aazadi is no longer enough

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It's ironic that 70 years after India became an Independent country and a democracy, the invocation of aazadi evokes bitter conflicts. Whether it is on university campuses or in the midst of the conflict in the Kashmir Valley – both calling for aazadi and challenging that call as anti-national arouses mighty passions.

By comparison, *swaraj* is hardly ever invoked in the public discourse. It almost seems like a historical artefact, a fragment of fading memories of the Freedom Struggle. *Swaraj* certainly does not incite raw passions in the way that *aazadi* does. Yet, this is precisely why *swaraj*, the concept and the ideal, might be far more important to our present and future.

First, because **aazadi** does not necessarily ensure **swaraj**. And second, because Swaraj at 70 potentially draws us into a well-rounded reflection on India as a **society** – rather than as a nation or an economy on the global stage.

Despite the obvious glamour attached to the term *aazadi*, it is actually secondary to *swaraj*. *Aazadi* more often refers to 'freedom from', whereas *swaraj* connotes 'freedom to' exercise a individual and collective sense of agency, to have a command over one's destiny.

Aazadi

, both as freedom of expression and action, can easily be limited to the narrow desires or grievances of an individual or a group. But

swaraj

implies a freedom that is based on control over one's passions – and thus a more holistic approach to competing claims over duties and rights.

Therefore, the opposite of swaraj is not merely the loss of your own freedom but the desire for control over others. Vigilantism is one extreme form of such control over other people's lives and behaviour. Concentration of economic power, even when it is in the name of delivering better services, is another form of control if it happens through means that limit or restrict ordinary people's sense of agency, their ability to take initiative.



This is why Mahatma Gandhi's notion of

swaraj

was first and foremost focused on individuals doing their duty as citizens. For Gandhi, performance of duties was the most crucial kind of initiative required to ensure that rights are protected and realisable.

Of course, Gandhi's material vision of

swaraj

was unabashedly utopian. His wish list outlined that nobody is anybody's enemy, everybody contributes to the common goal, everyone can read and write, sickness and disease are reduced to the minimum, there are no paupers, labour can always find employment, and that the rich use their riches wisely rather than squandering it displays of pomp and pleasure.

If swaraj was a destination then it might be justified to despair at how far we are from fulfilment of most all these goals.

Instead, if *swaraj* is seen as a process then there is merit in exploring, from diverse vantage points, how the process is unfolding.

A review of India after 70 years of Independence might be focused on how all of the above goals, and more, can be pursued more efficiently with better optimisation of resources – regardless of how economic and political power is concentrated in the process.

By contrast, a review of Swaraj at 70 is inevitably focused not on deliverable goods and services but the actual increase in people's own sense of agency and prevention of excess concentration of power.

Thus, this series of conversations has reached out to people in diverse areas of public life. Each conversation begins at the emotive level to explore what feelings the idea of swaraj now evokes and then goes on to explore the state of Swaraj at 70 in different sectors – finance, politics, agriculture, human rights, food sovereignty, culture, conflict resolution.

This is a far from comprehensive representation of the areas of work and concern in Indian society today. Nevertheless, the conversations that will feature in this space over the next few days do represent diverse perspectives on the process of building [swaraj](#) – with glimpses of both the accompanying agony and hope.

Part 1: Past 25 years are a matter of pride, but there's a long way to go, says Baijayant 'Jay' Panda

Part 2: Not being able to disagree without causing upheaval is dangerous, says Sushobha Barve

Part 3: Alternative brand of politics has disappeared from India, says Piyush Mishra

Part 4: Youth can play a significant role in solving farm crisis, says Kavitha Kuruganti

Part 5: For true freedom, we need to end oppression of handouts and subsidies, says Arun Maira

[Part 6: People's aspirations are no longer limited by age and class, says Ashni Biyani](#)

[Part 7: India needs a more inclusive model of development, says Vijay Mahajan](#)

Part 8: Politicising of human rights issues has pushed liberal discourse into corner, says Kalyani Menon-Sen

Part 9: Technology has the potential to redefine social fabric of India, says Siddharth Sthalekar

Part 10: Food sovereignty should be ultimate goal of democracy, says Jean Dreze

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