

Delhi bores and swadeshi

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This is an age of “abuse”, by now a part of common speech and concern. To child abuse, sexual abuse, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and so on has recently been added a “swadeshi” abuse. This abuse is particularly painful to observe for those Indians who have seen the term being used for self-reliance and strengthening of the domestic political economy in relation to the coloniser; for those who know of the post-Washington consensus which speaks of rethinking on the how of building a national political economy so that it can, without departing from its own course, enter the liberalisation-globalisation track. It is painful to see the almost trivial debate, with “little” ideas and incentives in macro-economic policy, being termed as “swadeshi” and therefore “fundamentalist” and thus anti-reforms.

The stirring political call of “swadeshi”, a flag of the freedom struggle, has become a football to be kicked around in the playing fields of macro-economic policy debates. Its status is vividly illustrated when a press report says that the Japanese ambassador to India is concerned about the “swadeshi” element in the latest budget. “Swadeshi” then is like an element to be found like a husk or stone in a bag of grain of economic reform!

Gandhi's three concepts -- self-rule, self-reliance and welfare of all -- were a response to a thousand-year-long tortuous history of invasions and foreign domination. Through these main concepts -- swaraj, swavalambh, and sarvodaya -- he sought not only to prepare India for political freedom but to make a nation of free people, free in mind and spirit, and self-reliant and committed to build a social order which aimed at the welfare of all.

These concepts cannot be removed from their context, and kicked around. Gandhi believed that the unthinking craze for Western civilisation and disregard, if not ignorant contempt, for India's own civilisation lay at the root of India's slavery and that mental slavery would persist if not arrested and cured, even after the British left India, and prevent her from coming into her own.

This is the sum and substance of his *Hind Swaraj* written in 1908 (originally in Gujarati) during his return sea-journey from England. The timing and provocation for *Hind Swaraj* was provided by the growing emergence of the cult of violence in India and South Africa, whose concept of freedom (swaraj) was limited to driving the British out of India. The lack of thought on what India would do with that freedom appalled Gandhi.

It was in this context that he pointed out that limited freedom was not worth having and might not in fact endure and initiated a search for concepts which described the wider freedom and the ideal social order that India should strive for.

It is also necessary to note that his domain was not the state but the society. He was always addressing himself to the society and to individuals who constituted the society. It is astonishing to listen to the wise men of Delhi, the same old economists and economic commentators that the electronic media spews up year after year, say that India is backward and living in the past, that she should look at the speed and clarity with which Southeast Asia

integrated herself into the world and (with a smirk) not to hanker after “swadeshi”. My first reaction to such homilies is: “But, which world are you living in, brothers?”

The so-called new paradigm coming from Washington is supposed to look “beyond liberalisation, towards national domestic economic strength”. This, in a sense, is what India built in the first 25 years after Independence up to the Fifth Plan.

True, internal domestic competitiveness, excessive bureaucratisation, red-tapism, lack of attention to research and development in technology, to skill development and so on, along with the huge burst of population, tethered the potential for building growth with equity. True, the deterioration in the participatory element of political structures (with the breakdown of internal democracy in political parties, usurpation of local institutional power by the higher crust and structures of power at the state and national levels undermined capacity to build a more just and equitable society. But these two “failures” neither make the sweeping generalisation of the Delhi bores any better, nor do they destroy the legitimacy of the rethinking that is taking place in the world.

At a meeting of economists in Geneva on February 3-6, called by UNCTAD and the UNDP, to develop the framework by which the least developed countries could prepare themselves for entry into the great globe and its entrails without being swallowed, the stress was on the need for caution, slowness, moderation, selective incentives, selective protection, in entering or integrating a national political economy into the world economy.

The economists asked for the recall of “the bad old days” of selective protection, subsidies, and strengthening of the domestic economy before entering the open jaws of the international market. These were hardly “swadeshi” economists, to misuse that word. They were hard-headed, hard-nosed economists from the World Bank, the economic research centres in Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, Sussex and other centres of learning.

They were all trade economists but were rethinking the paradigm, as was UNCTAD Secretary-General Roberto Ricupens himself. The Indian record in building national economies, in precariously surviving even the Asian flu and having the best negotiators against world dominance was extolled.

What enrages one is that we are having to be led by an ill-informed, bigoted set of so-called opinion-makers who once dismissed public action groups including the women's movement, the environmentalists, and workers' movements as anti developmental, anti-growth and therefore unrealistic and anti-poor. Now when the words of those groups weigh with centres of power like Washington, Bonn and Tokyo, our pundits are still asking us to destroy what little is left of our strength and fall into the traps from which Brazil, Mexico, East Asia, Indonesia and Thailand are struggling to free themselves. This will help them once more to say that “India was too late”. Fortunately, India is not too late.

But she will be, if the country's leadership, social movements and public action groups do not sit up, claim ideology and put it into practice. We will be “the lost civilisation”, not because of our masses, who are politically conscious and understand the value of democratic politics, but because of the glib and smirking opinion-makers.

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