

# **Constitutional Framework and Structures of Governance in India: A Historical Perspective**

**Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup**

**LECTURE X, Saturday, September 01, 2012**

## **SUMMARY**

In the tenth talk in this series, Sri Devendra Swarup explored the stirrings of a new nationalist consciousness in the period following 1857 and culminating in 1893.

Sri Swarup began by deliberating on what might be most appropriately termed the next major landmark in modern Indian history after 1857; should it be 1885 or 1893? The former was the year of the founding of the Indian National Congress, which was to later play a crucial role in the struggle for Independence. At that stage, however, Congress was only an association of a few persons. The year 1893 was much more momentous. The developments that occurred in 1893 had a bearing on India's civilizational journey. In that year, Swami Vivekananda, a young unknown man then, went to the Parliament of Religions at Chicago and mesmerised the gathering with his powerful speech on India's spiritual message for the world. Overnight, he became a household name.

In the same year, Sri Aurobindo returned home after a long stay in England. He had been sent abroad at the tender age of six by his father, who was determined to make him a complete Englishman, shorn of every trace of his native culture. But, as Sri Aurobindo himself wrote, no sooner did he reach the shores of India, the motherland reclaimed her son. Sri Aurobindo, rejecting the Congress method of prayer and petition, wrote a series of articles under the title "New Lamps for the Old".

It was also in 1893 that Lokmanya Tilak made his famous declaration that Swaraj was his birthright and he would have it. He also began the custom of public organisation of Ganesh Festival, which remains with us till today. Till then, Ganesh Puja had been a family affair; Lokmanya Tilak made it a large scale public event and an effective medium of public awakening and mobilisation. The Ganesh Puja festival also became an occasion for recalling our national heritage and unity.

The fourth major occurrence in the year 1893 was the arrival of Annie Besant in India. As leader of the Theosophical Society, she adopted Indian dress and manners, admired Indian cultural

thought tradition and declared that India was a superior civilization that had nothing to learn from England.

It was perhaps only a coincidence that in 1893 Mohandas Gandhi went to Africa, from where he would return as the Mahatma who stirred India to a higher level of national consciousness. The soul of India manifested itself through these several events that happened together in 1893. Therefore, that year should be certainly seen as a major turning point of Indian history.

While examining developments of the period immediately following 1857, we must also recall the contributions of Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Ramakrishna Paramhanas. Both were products of traditional Indian, not western, education. They could not speak or write a single word in English. Yet they could attract and inspire English-educated youth in large numbers, gave them pride in their national heritage and awakened national consciousness, resulting in a powerful movement against untouchability, cow-slaughter and mass poverty and in favour of Swadeshi. Both of them forcefully articulated India's civilisational strengths and heritage.

Sri Devendra Swarup then entered into a digression to discuss the nature of nationalism; the question had been raised by Madhu Kishwar in the previous lecture and she had asserted that nationalism by its very nature was divisive and destructive of human harmony. Sri Devendra Swarup said that it was important to distinguish between nationalism as it manifested itself in Europe and in India. Nationalism in the West was only a political phenomenon; there it was mainly about establishing and strengthening nation-states. This certainly pitted the nations of Europe and their people against each other. Language was an important marker of nations organised around a nation-state; and this became another cause of oppression. The French, for instance, made determined efforts to impose their language in whichever country they gained political ascendancy. The Germans, when they began to assert themselves, made a resolute effort to diminish the French language. European nationalism was expansionist and anti-universalism.

Such a situation did not arise in India because the cultural and spiritual tradition of India is assimilative. It respects diversity which is seen as manifestation of the Divine. It values the fundamental unity that underlies the seeming diversity. In India, *jati dharma*, *kula dharma*, *rashtra dharma*, all become steps in the search for the ultimate unity of mankind.

Indian nationalism, therefore, has been marked by certain distinguishing features, predominant among them being respect for the tradition and reverence for the land which we call Bharat Mata. The Prithvi Sukta is a *stotra* that celebrates and worships the land; it has been rightly described as the first national song in the world. Another distinguishing feature of Indian nationalism has been that for its spread and expansion it relied mainly on spiritual and cultural dissemination. The agency for such dissemination was not the state, but the Brahmins. In the

West, on the other hand, the instrument of national assertion and expansion was the State. Quoting Manusmriti, Sri Devendra Swarup traced the cradle of cultural movement in Brahmavarta or Kurukshetra and four geographical stages of its expansion.

In the nineteenth century, the English-educated Indians, seeped in the Western tradition as they were, got confused about the nature of Indian nationalism. S. N. Bannerjee gave his autobiography the title of “India, A Nation in Making,” as if to imply that the Indian nation had not yet come into being. But in a speech delivered in 1876, he dwelt at length on the contributions of ancient India. Such identification with the ancient cultural heritage was evident in all the three Presidencies. The English-educated were opposed to conversions and it was evident that their education had not succeeded in cutting them from their roots. Their national consciousness was struggling to express itself in the western idiom imparted by the English education.

Rajnarayan Bose, the maternal grandfather of Sri Aurobindo, for example, was a typical westernized Bengali. As a part of (Henry Louis Vivian) Derazio’s Young Bengal, he had become a drug addict, alcoholic and atheist. But gradually he recovered and became one of the pioneers of a resurgent Hindu India. His “Prospectus”, published in 1866 with Nabagopal Mitra, carrying the full title of “The Prospectus of a Society for the promotion National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal”, was a blueprint for the regeneration of the ancient Hindu civilization in its varied manifestations. He began organising the “Hindu Mela”, which was later renamed “National Mela”; it was an occasion for the exhibition and dissemination of the Indian skills in medicine, crafts, sports and literature etc. Later, such new consciousness manifested itself politically in the Swadeshi Movement of 1905.

---

The talk was followed by a lively discussion. A significant issue that arose during this discussion concerned the role of Annie Besant in the reassertion of Indian nationalism. Several persons in the audience felt that her role was not entirely positive. In the course of the discussion Dr. J. K. Bajaj also emphasised that though a major force for the spread of Indian national consciousness in the ancient times was the shared spiritual heritage, which over time pervaded all parts of India, yet this spiritual unity and awakening manifested itself in a land that seems to be created geographical one. The geographical unity of India has been recognised from the ancient times and finds mention in foundational texts of India.

The talk was chaired by Sri Brij Kishore Kuthiala, Vice-Chancellor of Makhanlal Chaturvedi University, who had specially come from Bhopal to participate in this series of talks.

In his next talk, scheduled for September 08, 2012, Sri Devendra Swarup shall carry the story of the march of Indian National Consciousness after 1857 further up to 1909.

---