

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

Series of Weekly Lectures by Sri Devendra Swarup

LECTURE XIV, Saturday, October 6, 2012

SUMMARY

Dr. J. K. Bajaj mentioned the sad demise on October 3, 2012 of Sri Kedar Nath Sahni, one of the main architects of the Jan Sangh and later the BJP in Delhi, former Mayor and Chief Metropolitan Councillor of Delhi and former Governor of Sikkim. On the request of Dr. Bajaj, Sri Raj Kumar Bhatia made a detailed obituary reference to Sri Sahni. Before beginning his talk, Sri Devendra Swarup recalled his long personal association with Shri Sahni and recounted several instances from his life. Both Sri Bhatia and Sri Devendra Swarup particularly recalled the great emphasis Sri Sahni placed on punctuality on all occasions and the persistence and rigour with which he followed the rules and procedures of administrative functioning, even at the cost of personal convenience and popularity. They also warmly recalled the great simplicity and warm heartedness he was able to maintain, even while occupying high administrative and political positions.

In his fourteenth talk of this series, Sri Devendra Swarup described and analysed the state of public activity in India when Mahatma Gandhi returned from South Africa in January 1915.

At the beginning, Sri Devendra Swarup mentioned that following the appreciation of Bipin Chandra Pal expressed by him in the last talk, Sri L.N. Jhunjhunwala had shown him a quote where Mr. Pal seems to be wholeheartedly welcoming the British rule as a blessing for India. Sri Swarup said that the quote was from an earlier period of Bipin Chandra Pal. Mr. Pal had undergone a major ideological transformation after 1901 and had come to believe that Indian nationalism had to be very different from the British nationalism and necessarily had to be rooted in Indian civilisational tradition and ethos. Writing in February 1913, Bipin Chandra Pal had acknowledged this transformation, “Thirty years ago, we were completely under the spell of the European illumination. We knew little of our own ideals and institutions, and had not the capacity, therefore, to judge and weigh the ideals and institutions of Europe that had commenced to overwhelm us. Since then, a great wave of social reaction and religious revival has passed over the country.”

In the initial years following the birth of Indian National Congress in 1885, the speeches at the Congress sessions used to be full of adoration for the British rulers. Gradually, as a result of the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century, Indian national consciousness evolved and expanded and finally got over the delusional veneration of everything British. Swadeshi Movement (1905-1909), led by the English-educated classes, was a product of this national

awakening. Lord Minto, the then British Viceroy, gave voice to the British fear of the rising national consciousness. In his letter of June 5, 1907 to Morley, the Secretary of State, he wrote that caste and religious differences, certainly in respect to the groups of Mohammedans and Hindus, were showing signs of weakening, and that in the next generation there was a real prospect of the disappearance of the separation based on caste and religion in deference to the calls of political aims.

As mentioned in the last lecture, the Swadeshi Movement led to the creation of three distinct streams of nationalism. Two of these streams were represented by the “moderate” and “extremist” groups within the Congress. The third stream was of armed revolutionaries; they were a major cause of worry for the British officials. Initially, the armed revolutionaries enjoyed the support of the three high leaders of the “extremist” faction of the Congress: Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. But, by around 1915, all three had realised the limitations of the revolutionary movement and distanced themselves from it.

Sri Aurobindo initially believed that armed revolution could lead to independence. This is evident from his work *Bhavani Mandir* (probably written in 1902) and other autobiographical writings. But by 1915, Aurobindo came to believe that a handful of revolutionaries could not challenge the great military might of the British Empire. In 1918, we find Aurobindo advising A. B. Puranik, one of his revolutionary disciples, to forget about armed revolution.

Lala Lajpat Rai had also initially experimented with armed struggle. He was for some time close to Ajit Singh, the uncle of Bhagat Singh, and both were sent into exile from India in 1907. During his long exile to America (1907-1919), he met Hardayal, a leading organiser of the Ghadar Movement. After his return to India, however, he realised that armed revolutionaries could not succeed in gaining Independence for India because they lacked an all-India organisation and could only plan local actions.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak was arrested and tried in 1897 for inciting Chapekar brothers to murder Rand. He helped Savarkar go to England. He was perhaps the first leader to transcend his regional base and acquire an all-India status. This is evident by the funds collected for his release from various parts of India. Demand for Tilak’s release came from international quarters too; several Indologists including Max Mueller appealed to British authorities to release Tilak. Again in 1908, Tilak was prosecuted for praising the violent acts of Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki. He was deported to Mandalay for 6 years. After his release from jail in 1914, he seems to have abandoned the path of direct confrontation with the British and advocated responsive cooperation. He played a crucial role in the Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Congress and the Muslim League; this pact in fact laid the constitutional foundations of Pakistan.

The only extremist leader who was never in favour of revolutionary movement was Bipin Chandra Pal. In 1906, he opposed his colleagues of *Vandematram* paper on the issue of revolutionary movement. He praised and saluted the sacrifices and patriotism of the armed revolutionaries and their ability to inspire the youth. But he rationally presented the limitations of the revolutionary path. Because of his ideological differences, he resigned from

Vandematram. Even then he refused to give evidence against Sri Aurobindo and agreed to suffer a jail term for his refusal.

The revolutionary movement had thus lost steam by 1915. It was unable to face the British suppression; most of the revolutionaries were either in jail or in exile outside India. By then, all the major leaders who had played active role in the Swadeshi Movement were also no more active in public life. Lajpat Rai was in exile in America. Tilak was imprisoned in Mandalay. Aurobindo was in hiding, first in the French territory of Chandranagar and then in Pondicherry. Later, he abandoned politics altogether and concentrated on Yogamarga. Bipin Chandra Pal, after his release from jail in 1908, had left for England to return only in 1911.

It was in this atmosphere of dead silence in Indian politics that Gandhi returned to India in January 1915. Because of his work amongst the Indians in South Africa, he had become quite well-known and popular in India even before his arrival. Gokhle had lavished great praise on Gandhiji in the 1909 session of the Congress held at Lahore. Pran Jeevan Mehta wrote a biography of Gandhiji as early as in 1910 and in this he had called Gandhiji a living symbol of the tradition of ancient India. Incidentally, Pran Jeevan Mehta is the “Reader” of “Hind Swaraj”; Mahatma Gandhi himself had said that “Hind Swaraj” is a narration of the long discussions he held with Pran Jeevan Mehta, when both of them stayed together for a month in a London hotel in 1909.

It is therefore not surprising that when Gandhi arrived in Bombay, his reputation had preceded him and he received a tremendous welcome. Ten daily papers wrote editorials welcoming Gandhi, some even calling him an *Avatar*. Gandhiji’s coming to India at that time, when all political and revolutionary activity in the country seemed to have completely subsided and India was in a kind of slumber, was in fact of great significance. The significance of Gandhi’s entry in the Indian politics was recognised by even Subhas Bose, one of his strongest critics.

After reaching India, Gandhiji first visited Santiniketan; he left there the batch of his followers from the Phoenix Ashram, who had come with him from South Africa. Then he went to the Kumbha in Haridwar, where he is known to have drawn large crowds. He also visited Gurukul Kangri. Before coming to India, in fact before the launch of Satyagraha in South Africa in 1906, he had adopted the four great virtues befitting the saints: *Satya* (Truthfulness), *Ahimsa* (Non-Violence), *Aparigriha* (Non-Acquisition) and *Brahmacharya* (Celibacy). Soon, he also adopted the dress of a poor Indian peasant. All this made him dear to the people of India, who saw a Mahatma in him.

Gokhle, who was instrumental in calling Gandhi to India, was on his deathbed when Gandhiji arrived. Before his death in February 1915, Gokhle told M. R. Jayakar that Gandhiji had the ability to instantly develop a rapport with the poorest and the lowliest in the society. But Gokhle also mentioned that he was not sure about Gandhiji’s skills at the negotiation table. In due course, both prophesies of Gokhle about Gandhiji came true. Gandhiji emerged as the greatest mass leader India has produced. The graph of his success rose continuously up to 1930. But after his release from prison in January 26, 1931, it began to dip downwards

because of his failure to properly handle the diplomatic moves of the British made through the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Communal Award, etc.

Gandhiji, in his *Hind Swaraj*, presented an ideal picture of an Indian way of building life and society, while completely rejecting European civilisation including the British parliamentary system. Gandhiji presented a unique conception of village-centred democracy. Gandhiji, at the theoretical level, stood by this picture of India throughout his life, though he indeed kept compromising in practice. Gandhiji's significance, however, is in tenaciously presenting the detailed picture of an Indian way of national, social, political and economic organisation in the modern times.

At the end of the talk, there was a fairly detailed discussion on Gandhiji's role in Indian polity. Some in the audience, especially Sri Jhunjhunwala, raised several issues about the political and personal integrity of Gandhiji. Replying to these questions, Sri Devendra Swarup said that no person is perfect. It is important to look at and appreciate the efforts that a person makes to achieve perfection before criticising him for his human failures. Gandhiji should be judged on the greatness and intensity of his effort rather than the incompleteness and imperfection of the results.
