FROM DEMOCRACY TO SWARAAJ

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Democratising locally to globally, in all spheres of life comprehensively, is the call of the day.
It means a collective struggle for wholesome well-being and beauty on the planet encompassing *swaraaj* (self-rule), *swadharm* (each one's ethically bound duty), *swaabhiman* (dignity), *saadgi* (ecological lifestyle) and *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency).

Pursuing the Democratic Dream

People in South Asia have long cherished values which, in modern times, are best expressed under the rubric of 'universalism' and various dimensions of 'democracy'. Before the colonial interventions of the West, the distinctive features of our socio-political system were cultural plurality, devolution of political power at all levels and the participatory mode of governance from the grassroots to the top.

We had our own failings, such as the obnoxious practice of untouchability, or the fact that communitarian principles manifested through the caste system degenerated into hierarchical fundamentalism. However, despite all kinds of failings, the sense of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (a Sanskrit concept, meaning 'The Whole World is one Family') has been part of our cultural sensibility since time immemorial. That is why our socio-cultural diversity is a source of strength and in fact, the primary defining force behind our unbroken identity. There have, of course, been brief phases of ideological or identity polarisations. But soon after, the pluralist perspective prevails. The basic premise of this worldview is that no sect, religion, ideological group, class, socio-political formation, the state or 'church' can claim a monopoly of the truth. All truths have to start with the small letter 't' and, depending upon the vantage point, they are able to capture only some aspects of the Truth and not the Truth as a whole. This forms the basis for a democratic society.

Conventionally, democracy is taken to be a political system based on the separation of judiciary, executive and legislature. In this system, the legitimacy of governance is derived from the electoral process and the right to vote. Such a narrow definition reduces democracy merely into a political instrument.

However, the last century has witnessed a series of transformations. They have generated an explosion of human energies never known before, devoted to redefining human life. The praxis of 'new' social movements embodies a much deeper and comprehensive meaning of democracy than what is understood and practised in the mainstream political discourse. Never before in the history of humankind have such a large proportion of human beings worked for *swaraaj*. ('*Swa'* + *'raaj'* = self + rule, a term commonly used by Gandhi and the Gandhi-inspired movements in India.)

Our aspiration is to redefine democracy from a mode of governance to a way of life. If democracy informs all levels and dimensions of life, this perspective of comprehensive democracy can be called *sampoorn swaraaj* (*sampoorn* = full, complete, comprehensive; *sampoorn swaraaj* = full realisation of self-rule).

To make the journey from the present liberal notion of democracy to that of *sampoorn swaraaj*, one looks toward the centre-left political processes, including social movement groups and parties with these inclinations. The rightist and the extreme left streams, who espouse violence as a political tool, are not part of this analysis.

The Contemporary Challenges before Centre-Left Movements in India (part of a larger South Asian identity)

Colonial rule and the hegemony of the modern western worldview converted a large part of the elite mindset to its monolithic, and completely anthropocentric, reductionist notion of universalism. However, a large section of the people still retained their basic worldview while adopting ideas and knowledge from the modern west. The state acted as a bearer of the benefits of modern science and technology to the 'marginalized majorities' while maintaining some support to traditional and indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Gandhi's dialogues with leaders of other streams, the pressure of popular democratic politics and the basic pluralist worldview allowed the retention of our moorings. The last twenty years have, in many ways, created a break with this legacy, the processes of globalisation of the 1980s-1990s hastening several transitions. We have become one of the globally vibrant economies in a time of worldwide recession, but we are not yet a stabilised economy. We are also in a flux as regards our social institutions, cultural choices and alliances of diverse political streams and formations. Retaining our moorings and yet gaining our place in the world, maintaining/regaining a quiet self-confidence that allows space for others, these are the challenges before us today.

At a larger level, we are one with the South Asian or even global South, as a large section of India's citizens remain bereft of the benefits of economic growth. Our centre-left political streams have to address the issues of basic needs, while simultaneously preserving our cultural moorings. The divide within these streams arises from this dual challenge. Some espouse a statist position, attempting to balance economic growth and welfarism. In the process, divergent streams have emerged - those wanting to rely entirely on modern science and technology, and considering traditional indigenous worldview and practice 'backward'; and other streams that emphasise the contemporary relevance of indigenous knowledge and life patterns. Both are confronting their ideological and practical limitations. The welfare state not having delivered on its promises to the majority too well in the past century, and the ecological consequences of modern development, bring promises of the first stream into question. However, ensuring minimum basic needs in the present, with changing natural resource base, knowledge, life patterns and aspirations of the majority, is a challenging task for the second set. It has led a section of this stream to denounce modern science and technology as well as social organization, including modern democracy, as demonic and unsuited to our context. The radical Gandhian/indigenous Socialist stream attempts to bridge the divide through a praxis of (i) engagement with state and non-state efforts at meeting basic needs of the marginalized majority, (ii) generating dialogue on issues relevant to a democratic social development, and (iii) non-violent resistance to ideologies, policies and actions that are seen as anti-democratic; those that tend to destroy the resource base, access to basic needs, worldview and cultural confidence of the marginalized majorities.

The Marxist-left has remained limited by its general inability to recognise and align with the indigenous radical idiom and symbols, thereby not relating to the majority on a cultural plane. The radical liberals, as well as Marxists, could not understand the severity of caste oppression including the practice of untouchablity among all religious communities in India/South Asia. Gandhi and his followers like Ram Manohar Lohia, were the ones who attempted to tackle this challenge head-on, besides the leadership from among the Dalits themselves like Jyotiba Phule and Baba Sahib Ambedkar.

Similarly, the high degree of participation of women in the national movement was a breakthrough

of sorts. Unfortunately, its gains were not adequately consolidated in the post-independence period. There has been a strong women's movement in the country in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in assertions by women at all levels and adoption of legal provisions ensuring their social and political rights. It arose out of the several political streams of the centre-left, with the recognition of need for a specific focus on women's issues. In the last two decades or so, there has been a regression in the women's movement, with a more apolitical, north-driven, 'gender issues' agenda taking its place in articulating women's rights without adequate interrogation of the patriarchal structures. However, the future scenario is more optimistic as there is reservation for women in the grassroot democratic institutions. This training of women at the grassroots is going to express itself at the provincial and national levels in the not too distant future. However, a greater and deeper engagement is necessary, to fight the continuing patriarchal structures and values as well as their backlash through cultural conservatism (as seen in aberrations like female foeticide, increasing suicides among young women, and the community's violence perpetrated on those choosing to enter marriage against the traditional norms of exogamy), and to move towards non-patriarchal gendered democracy. The challenge is to internalize the values of feminism and *swaraaj* in the basic units of family and community. In the spirit of v*asudhaiva kutumbakam*, it is to be hoped that the 'global family' then also reflects these values and re-tailors its institutions, polity and economy accordingly.

Comprehensive Democracy or *Sampoorn Swaraaj*
The idea of 'self-rule' goes much beyond the political. It encompasses life itself in a comprehensive manner that makes our lives more meaningful. *Swaraaj* relates to all dimensions of human life and applies to relationships at all levels, from the individual to the global:
(1)   the relationship between nature and human beings,
(2)   the dynamic of 'the individual' and 'the community',
(3)   the dynamic inter-relationship of 'the self' and 'the other',
(4)   the relationship of individuals and various types and levels of collectivities with governance structures, and
(5)   the relationship of individuals and collectivities with the market.

The striving for democracy within these relationships can be respectively termed ecological democracy, social democracy, cultural democracy, political democracy and economic democracy.
There is a comprehensive democratic revolution in the making: humankind is striving to redefine all the basic relationships of human life. No single ideology or region can be identified as the vanguard in terms of striving for the above five dimensions of democracy simultaneously.

Issues of self-rule, related to the dynamics of nature - human beings, have given rise to green parties, groups, movements and intellectuals all over the world. These green movements are increasing rapidly even in those parts of the world where, according to the conventional development indices, standards of material life are very high. In the societies of material affluence, there is an attempt to recover the 'green consciousness' and to address the challenges of ecological degradation. In most of the countries, movement groups are engaged in defensive action of saving the livelihood support systems, along with revitalising of ecological and cultural sensibility. Since these energies aim at greater participation of local communities in resolving the nature-human dynamic, we could call this the age of striving for ecological democracy.

Similarly, there is phenomenal human energy on this earth trying to redefine the individual-community dynamic. Issues of dignity are on the central agenda of many groups working for human rights, gender justice, anti-caste and anti-apartheid movements. There is almost a global churning for redefining social relationships, what we could term as social democracy. The response to the World Conference against Racism (held in Durban, South Africa, from 31 August - 7 September 2001) is an indicator of the revolutionary energies we are talking about. The women's movement

has now a gender perspective on all issues, it is no longer just a women's rights movement. From this standpoint, this is an age of strivings for social democracy.

If we analyse the dynamics of the self and the other, and systems of meaning, an entire set of issues emerge under the broad rubric called 'culture'. The human activity on this front is also of an unprecedented kind. There has been an explosion of new ideas and ideological confrontations, both violent and non-violent. The varied strivings of a cultural democracy are many: critiques of the culture of industrialised societies and modernity, the attempts at revitalising indigenous knowledge systems, emphasising the importance of the plurality of ideas and ways of life, and loosening the controls of orthodoxy, are all part of it.

After the majority of the states were liberated from colonial rule, they acquired greater control over their economies. The standard of living started rising, even though very slowly for some. Now, indigenous peoples with natural resource-based economies, and small and marginal farmers are in search for dignified ways of earning their livelihood. This is done through two ways of search and striving: first is to emulate (and even blindly imitate) the rich and prosperous North, the other is to recover the control over natural resources as well as knowledge systems in agriculture, medicine, food, water management, and so on. Both represent the pervasive desire for an economic democracy.

The anti-colonial struggles in the majority of the nations have constructed new political identities. A desire for self-rule is pervasive. The people are re-examining and redefining the transplanted colonial instruments. Sometimes there is regression as the firmly established elite impose some form of authoritarianism. Fortunately, participation of people in the political institutions has acquired a tremendous legitimacy. (This explains why many dictators have had to undertake a legitimisation exercise through some form of election, howsoever partial or imperfect.) This constitutes political democracy.

The imperative of democratic revolution requires that we recognise and relate to the positive dimension of all these energies and contribute in forming them into a definable worldview and a dream for the future. This is our vision of a universal humanistic globalisation.

The Democratic Agenda
In a phase of phenomenal upsurge of democratic aspirations, new norms have to be agreed upon at various levels of human collectivities. That has to be done through a process of participatory dialogue, even with the opponents. (Let us say, two neighbouring Nation States who are at loggerheads with each other, or two ideological adversaries in a single Nation State, or between and within communities and families.) One has to recognise the complementarity of each other's 'truth' and consciously avoid being judgemental regarding the other's viewpoint. The critical evaluation of other's viewpoints has to be in an idiom that encourages moderation.

In discussions that have taken place at various national and international forums, people have started to develop ideas about building a global network of individuals and organisations sharing similar values and goals. Such an initiative could also be seen as an effort to engage the international civil society in organising global or regional dialogue processes about a number of issues that are of crucial importance at this juncture.

It is, admittedly, somewhat uncomfortable to discuss democracy – which, as a process of constructive self-engagement of humanity, should be indivisible – in such small bits and shreds. However, if the complexity of democracy is approached through the five dimensions mentioned above, this should bring forward a wider and richer spectrum of problems and possibilities. One

possible articulation of these dimensions as thematic perspectives is suggested below.

i) *Empowerment of the Daridranarayan, the 'Last Person' (Economic Democracy)*

All the greatest teachers of humankind including Gandhi, Mohammed, Christ and the Buddha, have emphasised the importance of empowerment of the weakest and the poorest of society. Many people probably consider such a concept either patronising, elitist or naïve. Despite that, perhaps the most important single test for any kind of democracy is whether it works so that it can protect the needs and rights of the poorest, most oppressed and least influential people in the society. What this means in each society and in each historical period will differ, because poverty and deprivation will be created and regenerated repeatedly through widely varied means. But the issue or goal is clear and remains the same. One of the main problems is how to relate to the needs and concerns of the *Daridranarayan* in a way that is empowering and not patronising.

With the *Daridranarayan* at the centre of all thinking, all issues concerning transactions of goods and services, technological choices and mode and relations of production have always been part of human engagement. All such issues can be considered as the economic dimension of democracy, called 'economic democracy' for convenience.

ii) *Ecological Regeneration and People's Control over Natural Resources (Ecological Democracy)*

Environmental degradation - pollution of air, water and soil, loss of species and bio-diversity, destruction of the ozone layer, destabilisation of the climate, loss of trees and vegetative cover, soil erosion and desertification - is one of the most serious issues of our times. It should be a high priority for the movement. However, the discourse of the West and among the westernised organisations in the South is often very alienating for the majority of the (rural) people.

This discourse may result in programmes and measures neither understood nor owned by them. In the long run, such programmes can backfire. A better approach is to concentrate on people's control over natural resources, and integrate the various environmental and conservational concerns in such an approach. Humankind's relationship with nature as a consumer, controller, nurturer, destroyer, or as a small component of nature, are all issues to be dealt with under the rubric of ecological democracy.

iii) *Ensuring Human Dignity (Social Democracy)*

There is no doubt that the neo-liberal economic policies and other measures pursued by the 'new right' will be causing extreme poverty on a scale that could be unsurpassed in human history. In many cases the problems should be seen in the framework of empowering the *Daridranaryan* and as issues of acute economic survival. However, in most instances, issues like unemployment or underemployment, temporary employment, workers' rights and the meaning and nature of the available working opportunities are issues of human dignity across the globe. Even in cases where the crumbs falling from the table of the neo-liberals are more than enough to satisfy the basic material needs of the people, human dignity is sacrificed in a most harmful way.

The hegemonic neo-liberal policies create identities of greed, promote consumerism and materialism and prevent people from making good moral choices and pursuing their spirituality. They sacrifice human dignity for profit.

The struggle for dignity and social equity has to be the principle issue among Dalits. This way they are well equipped to contribute from their perspective and experience in the struggle against satanic globalisation. It is the actual situation among Dalits that forced large number of ideologues,

including Baba Sahib Ambedkar, to emphasise the importance of a caste annihilation movement in India. (In the rest of South Asia, due to the peculiar local situation, it is not even being recognised as an important source of inequity.) In the past two decades there has been regression of the upper caste from their earlier acceptance of empowerment of the ex-untouchable castes. Also, the increasing voice of women in the social sphere is being accompanied by new forms of perversions and violence against them, manifested e.g., by the declining sex ratio of 0-6 year-olds in India. These issues have to be viewed with their wider linkages under the rubric of social democracy.

iv) *Strengthening Plural Coexistence (Cultural Democracy)*

The issue of plural coexistence - and of the prevention of communal (or racial) violence - has a profound significance for every part of the world at the beginning of this millennium. When the world's economic and cultural crises deepen, the threat of communal violence increases. In areas suffering from acute environmental degradation, the undermining of the natural resource base can aggravate such problems.

In South Asia, there is a living tradition of peaceful co-living of various ethnic and religious groups and of sects within religions. This tradition is under great strain and needs to be revitalised in the present context. A judicial pronouncement in Bangladesh in January 2001 banning *fatwa* (religious edicts) is an authentic illustration of cultural democracy. Among the Hindus, vesting of adequate dignity to the folk practices not conforming to Brahmanical scriptural norms should be a priority item.

A campaign for cultural democracy should also be a mobilising act against attempts to distort history in almost all countries of the world, including those in Europe and America. In Europe, the Muslims are being projected as a fundamentalist or non-pluralist segment of the society. The increasing polarisation between the Islamic countries and the West (the European Union and the United States of America) has been deepened by instances like the Gulf War in 1990, which created anti-West feelings throughout the 'Islamic world'. The European integration - all the old colonial powers being fused into one new super-power - is worsening the situation because it is considered as the potential and powerful adversarial supra state by the Islamic states. The conflict will be further aggravated if the European Union becomes a real Federal State and if it develops a joint defence policy and a joint army. In that case all the EU member states, including the Nordic countries, will become integral parts of a major military super-power with a large arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Plural coexistence, however, should not be viewed from a negative viewpoint, but only through the scenarios of conflict that need to be prevented. It should be seen as richness, where new things are being created and recreated continuously through the interaction of differences. All of human history has developed through cultural interaction, diffusion and adaptation. Diversity in ways of life provides complementary ways of fulfilling the need for expression of diverse human tendencies in any society, and therefore must be nurtured.

v) *Nurturing and Deepening of Democracy (Political Democracy)*

Political democracy, if not constantly cared for and defended, can be greatly undermined. All the possible checks that can be built against the un-democratising thrust of social systems can only be effective if the people actively guard democratic structures and norms. Democracy - defined in terms like participation, representation and rule of law, protection of cultural, linguistic, religious and political minorities and transparency of political decision-making - is to be nurtured and deepened. However, at present only one model of such democratic processes is being adopted by all the countries with different cultures, institutions and traditions: the western liberal or market

democracy, whose specificities have evolved in a small cultural-historical zone of the globe.

So far, the most important institutional framework for negotiating a society incorporating universalistic-humanistic values is political democracy, based on a multi-party system, adult franchise and separation of powers of executive, judiciary and legislature. Even this comes under threat when other forms of democracy are not realised. The principle of subsidiarity of power, i.e., allowing the people to exercise self-rule at the grassroot level, is crucial to ensure participatory democracy. District, provincial and national political power should not be treated as higher levels of power, but as different spheres of power.

The big wave of indigenisation and anti-westernisation - which is part explanation for the Islamic Resurgence, the growth of the Hindutva-movements and the economic and cultural rise of China - cannot be wished away lightly. If issues like democracy, human rights or women's rights get labelled as "western values" by various oppressive forces in the South, there is a real danger that these values will be seriously undermined during the first century of the new millennium.

Directions of Search

In the bottom-up view of participatory democracy where institutions, ideas and ideologies are worked out by the people themselves, there is a contradiction in terms to suggest institutions of governance. Instead of giving a top-down solution, we would like to engage with the following questions with regard to the potential and direction which the present flux will take. Our method of working towards the ideal of *sampoorn swaraaj* is based on our belief that gives faith and hope in human beings and inclusive social processes.

Faith: We share a faith in fellow human beings, that selfishness and greed are only one part of the human journey and not the dominating, defining characteristic of human life. Wants can be fulfilled, and even indulged in, without being glorified. We insist that it is very degrading to define human beings as entities with material wants only. They have moral, spiritual and cultural orientations as well. Undermining these aspects is resulting in loss of meaning in life, generating a backlash in the form of religious extremism.

Hope: The faith in this notion of human nature creates a resource for perennial hope, a belief in human life being a constant struggle between good and evil. The task of building true democracy is now firmly linked with the global struggle to reform or transform capitalism without the imposition of a top-down, readymade version of socialism. It is a new project. However, it is based on the perennial human need to fight for the 'good' with values of compassion, justice, equality and freedom. It is based on understanding the spiral and web of life and to nurturing life in its most holistic sense in the contemporary context.

The Method: The method for democratic struggles has three aspects. One is 'dialogue', basically to recognise the contours of the present times. Through dialogues we not only recognise our times, but also understand the calling of our times. Dialogue at all levels, including with the adversary, is possible only if we do not believe in the conspiracy theory and believe in willingness of the human spirit for struggle and self-sacrifice against injustice. However, grasping the essence of the times will be incomplete if we do not simultaneously fight the injustice. For this, the second component is 'non-violent civil disobedience' that provides expression to the human struggle for 'good' over 'evil' and is an invitation for dialogue to the power-wielding adversary. The third component of the method is 'constructive action' to create structures, activities and lifestyles in consonance with the vision of a democratic society, addressing all the various dimensions of comprehensive democracy or *sampoorn swaraaj*.

Proposals for Concrete Action
With the above approach, and the contemporary challenges before centre-socialist-green-feminist social action, the following are some suggestions for concrete action. These are only illustrative, since action agendas will have to be developed by mass organisations themselves in a bottom-up approach and by advocacy campaign organisations, keeping the various linkages of comprehensive democracy and levels of social organisation in mind.

Dialogue
• Opening up spaces for multiple visions to evolve, flower and express themselves. Dialogue, or in fact multi-logue across the diverse visions among the centre-socialist-green-feminist groups and between diverse strands within them, will enrich all human striving. This will strengthen each strand and sub-strand giving us the confidence to address the urge for equality and justice of billions on the planet. With a vibrant *swaraaj* stream, it should be possible to win over those engaged in violent struggle for justice and equality as allies in local and global non-violent civil disobedience movements. It will also make it possible to transform the adversary (the imperialist-capitalist, the mercenary terrorist, and the fascist) through a dialogic engagement and other democratic means.

• Institutionalising quasi-permanent structures/networks for enduring 'Dialogues on comprehensive democracy'. We need to consciously and urgently cultivate peer groups, clubs, institutions, networks, movement groups and political parties to discuss the positive forms of intervention to deepen democracy.

• Institutionalising quasi-permanent structures/networks for enduring 'Dialogues on democracy and globalisation'. This can be the most strategic tool for global democratisation, with the caution that it is informed by bottom-up processes. The space provided by the World Social Forum should be used for forging new global alliances. Conscious south-south dialogic interfaces must be ensured across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, including the poor of the global North.

Defending the Democratic Spaces and Life Patterns
• We urgently need to undertake some defensive actions as well. We need to evolve a defence strategy in preserving what the hegemonic forces have not so far destroyed. Southern civilisations have been practising for thousands of years a way of life that we now describe as 'green principles'. A careful look at their livelihood support systems will show that limiting the wants was a conscious choice for conservation and regeneration of nature and not always due to sheer technological 'backwardness'. But now, the present form of globalisation is destroying these communities at a very rapid pace. Global democratic forums need to set up a 'defence committee' to defend 'green communities' in the South. Otherwise, what has been preserved through thousands of years will be completely destroyed in the next couple of decades.

• We need an independent information, research and media network to identify the democratic practices, struggles, dreams and dramas being unfolded and enacted in the family called Earth. We need to collect, collate and then share this information, especially for those who are still prisoners of the mirage of the American consumer paradise. We should resolve to set up such media centres all over the world and to disseminate this information in the people's languages as widely as possible, besides doing so in English.

• All these dialogues and building up of institutions and networks should culminate into building a global front for defending, deepening and expanding democracy. This front can be built through a combination of intellectual activism and organisation building. The organisation building

cannot happen through intellectual activism alone. The evolution of ideological frameworks and building up of networks can happen effectively if we use the tool of civil disobedience and constructive action, as evolved by Gandhi.

Organising for Non-Violent Civil Resistance

•   Those who believe in democracy have not only to shun violence themselves, but also have to delegitimise violence as a method for social change. They have to sharpen the tools of non-violent civil disobedience. Gandhi believed that only those who are civil and obey the laws of the land have the right to fight the unjust laws.

•   A campaign should be launched against all diversionary moves which, in the name of cultural nationalism and 'national sentiments', put issues such as the right to work and right to sustainable livelihood on the back-burner.

•   Non-violent civil disobedience should be resorted to if other steps of dialogue fail. For instance on issues such as: the agendas of boycotting genetically modified food-grains and biotechnology produced edible materials, of resistance to the setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), mining and dam projects that displace large numbers of population. This needs prior adequate political and technical preparation, including sustainable land use planning.

•   Democratising existing global institutions by sensitising them to the processes of non-violent civil disobedience and making them supportive towards the urges these actions represent. Civil disobedience will build pressure on existing institutions for their constant renewal by an interactive process.

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