

The Use and Abuse of Swadeshi

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In an election season, it is natural for politicians to attempt to conjure up marquee campaign slogans. India's new-age election strategists and speech-writers are increasingly looking Westward for inspiration. Faced with the current economic situation, Western governments have begun to retreat from a free-market position they ardently advocate to the rest of the world. Instead they are taking recourse to jingoism like 'Buy American'. Taking the lead from this approach, in a speech recently delivered to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, BJP leader L. K. Advani offered his own mantra for curing India of its many ills - "a robust, self-confident Swadeshi model of development".

The BJP seems to have drawn a curious lesson from its disastrous 2004 campaign. If the Congress could hypocritically speak of the *aam aadmi*, the BJP reckons it can rid itself of the deadweight of its 'India Shining' campaign with a sleight of hand. However, such attempts should not be allowed to undermine the true meaning of swadeshi.

Since its appearance in 1905 as a political idea following the partition of Bengal, swadeshi has had an interesting career. In the early years, Rabindranath Tagore rightly worried about the overtones of economic nationalism quickly degenerating into an insular ideology. Later, in the hands of thinkers like Aurobindo and the celebrated art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, swadeshi was infused with a moral and aesthetic content. In swadeshi, India now had an ethical basis to both resist imperial domination and find within itself the resources for civilisational renewal.

With Gandhi's arrival, the revolutionary potential for societal transformation that lay latent in swadeshi was unlocked. It is his genius that transformed it into a practical basis for non-violent mass politics. However, of more enduring and universal value is the Mahatma's deployment of swadeshi as a touchstone for a new moral and material basis for India's regeneration. Far from standing for narrow economic nationalism, Gandhi's swadeshi was meant to serve both the cause of political freedom and that of justice and equity in their fullest senses. Crucially, his swadeshi was devoid of any hatred or violence.

Today, the principle of swadeshi is honoured only in its violation. Despite the rhetoric, the economic and political choices of the NDA and UPA regimes remain virtually indistinguishable in their repudiation of the swadeshi ideal. Indeed, across the spectrum from the Left to the Right, political parties have prioritised the needs of the elite over that of the masses. Consequently, while they are suitably concerned about today's financial turmoil that has begun to affect the affluent, they have resolutely ignored the extended agrarian crisis that has devastated rural India for over a decade now.

The misuse of swadeshi is not confined to the political class alone. In fact, swadeshi has served as a convenient alibi for a cosy nexus between politicians and large corporate houses at the cost of the public good. This is best exemplified by the continuing saga of that curious example of 'swadeshi innovation', the Nano car. The Nano as a symbol of Indian success is a travesty of Gandhi's swadeshi that was first and foremost meant to address the needs of the last Indian.

In the context of such distortion, it is instructive to recall Gandhi's response to a similar scenario in 1934. In the 1930's, Indian industrial houses began to claim to represent the swadeshi ideal by the mere fact of being Indian. Gandhi was deeply unhappy with this wilful exploitation of a popular sentiment and mounted a sustained

challenge to rescue swadeshi from native capitalists. As clarified by Gandhi to the consternation of the business conglomeration, the All-India Swadeshi League, swadeshi could only imply the support of goods produced by small-scale industries. The practical translation of this ideal of ‘cent-percent swadeshi’ resulted in a renewed espousal of reconstructing the village economy as the key to India’s march towards self-reliance.

While in independent India Gandhi’s ideals were largely ignored, swadeshi has been misappropriated by both the state and the market. In the early decades, the ideal of swadeshi translated into import substitution and public sector industries. In the contemporary era of liberalised markets, swadeshi has been misused to symbolise the coming of age of Indian business on the world stage. In the process, independent India has largely ignored the fact that true swadeshi is a moral, cultural, and aesthetic project as much as it is an economic and political endeavour. In this expansive conception of swadeshi, the primary focus is neither the state nor the market but freedom and justice for every individual in society. Indeed, swadeshi demands that the interests of the state and market be made secondary to that of society. As a consequence, swadeshi privileges the local and regional over national and international priorities. In moral terms, swadeshi deems that a society cannot prosper without addressing the needs of its weak. Gandhi’s emphasis on the village stems from this imperative and not from a romantic idea of a glorious past.

Notwithstanding the attempts to appropriate swadeshi for narrow and exclusionary ends, it cannot be shorn of its economic, cultural and moral implications. Economic swadeshi is not a form of knee-jerk isolationism but an approach designed to ensure the well-being of every individual. In cultural terms, swadeshi is no unreflective and chauvinistic pride that results in xenophobic prescriptions. Rather, as Gandhi consistently argued, swadeshi implies a rootedness that simultaneously allows for a healthy engagement with the wider world. With this true meaning of swadeshi in mind, one hopes that the electorate will reject any party that tries to appropriate and distort an important part of our freedom’s legacy.