



विकास प्रबंधन संस्थान
Development Management Institute



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Empowering Grassroots



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Her other books include: *Long Haul: the Bombay Textile Workers Strike 1982 - 83* (1986), *A Warning and an Opportunity: the Dispute over Swami Vivekananda's Legacy* (1994), *Let's Make it Happen: a backgrounder on New Economics* (2003), *An Economics for Well-Being* (2007), and *Trusteeship: Business and the Economics of Well - Being* (2016).

Rajni serves on the Boards of Child Rights and You (CRY) and Citizens for Peace. She is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture and a long term associate of Centre of Education and Documentation (Mumbai and Bangalore).



Convocation Address

Swaraj as a Journey

Rajni Bakshi

It is an honour to be invited to be present at the Convocation Ceremony of the Post Graduate Diploma in Management. I thank the Development Management Institute for inviting me to be here on your special day – as the graduating students step into the professional world on a date that marks the 100th anniversary of a poignant moment in our history.

Why poignant? you might ask. After all, several generations of Indians, and countless movements across the world, have found a deep and simple joy in the clarity and purpose of Gandhiji's stand before the magistrate in Champaran.

The memory of Gandhiji in Champaran is poignant not because it can evoke feelings of sadness about how little the values of that satyagraha are practised today. To lament the incomplete nature of so grand an experiment is at best short-sighted and at worst is a form of laziness.

On the contrary, the memory of Gandhiji at Champaran is poignant, moving and touching, precisely because it is loaded with a creative challenge that is more alive today than in Gandhi's own time.

How can that be? You might ask. Seventy years after azadi became a reality, India is a rising power on the world stage, there are expanding opportunities for young people like yourselves who have professional qualifications. It is also claimed that growth opportunities are not limited to privileged young people like yourself but extend to people in diverse segments of society.

But azadi does not ensure swaraj – either for you or for others.

And what does swaraj mean today?

Even 108 years ago when Gandhiji wrote his seminal text 'Hind Swaraj' – Swaraj meant much more than 'Home Rule'. Freedom from foreign rule was only one, and a somewhat limited, facet of Swaraj for Gandhiji. Of far greater importance was, and still is, Swaraj as a greater sense of agency for each person. This means having a greater command over your life by having a greater command over your own passions.

You could say that this seems like too lofty, too abstract a goal – and I would agree with you.

So let us look at three questions that most young people can relate to:

- Are your dreams, your aspirations, really your own or are you flying on auto-pilot? That is, are you pursuing dreams that are truly of your own making or just following the crowd?
- Are you planning to struggle for 'opportunities' within the existing game or are you inspired to create new possibilities? That is, forge new paths which stretch the limits of what is today considered 'doable'.
- Do you feel strong enough to speak truth to power – be it government or other forms of power? And if you do, then how is this to be done?

In 2017, as in any other time, Swaraj is the self-confidence, the sense of self-empowerment that enables us to explore answers to such questions.

Each person's quest for answers to these questions has a sanctity and autonomy. No one should offer you answers or tell you what to do.

So please view the stories I share with you today not as a roadmap but as a fair wind in your sails as your ship leaves harbour – in which ever direction you travel.

Swaraj as Higher Freedom: Self-chosen Dreams

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi went to South Africa, he was driven to fulfil aspirations that were not really of his own making. It was his elder brother's who had decided to send young Mohandas to England to become a barrister. In order to do this, the brothers had taken loans. On return young Mohandas had failed in all attempts to build a legal practice – either in Rajkot or in Mumbai. The offer from an Indian merchant in South Africa for Mohandas to represent him in a legal matter was a somewhat desperately needed opportunity – for at that juncture Gandhiji's dream, his aspirations, were shaped by the need to clear the debts incurred on his behalf.

It is the dramatic encounter with racist ill-treatment in South Africa that transforms young Mohandas' aspirations. He does indeed go on to build a successful legal practice and earn substantial amounts of money but this is no longer his dream.

His eye is on a larger goal because by then his sense of self-empowerment makes Gandhi militate against not just his own oppression but that of others as well.

This expanded sense of 'self', one that includes a concern for the needs of others, is the essence of swaraj. Because if you value your freedom, the right to define your own dreams, it follows that you have to respect the right of others to do the same.

So if swaraj is command over yourself, the opposite of swaraj is not just loss of your own freedom but the desire for control over others.

As you venture forth in life the means to increase material wealth and

social standing can probably happen on auto-pilot or by following the familiar tracks. It is in finding the pathways on which you can do this while also increasing other people's sense of agency—that is, confidence in their ability to solve their own problems – that you may also find the dreams of your own making.

Opportunities for Economic Democracy

You are all familiar with Bill Gates and Microsoft. But few people may have heard about Richard Stallman and Tim Berners-Lee. In the early 1980s, Richard Stallman was a young scientist in the Artificial Intelligence lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston when desktop computers became a big business. Until then software programming had been almost entirely the purview of computer geeks who shared programs freely.

As desktop computers became big business, software programs were coming under proprietary control. Richard Stallman, who till then was happy to be working on the nitty gritty details of artificial intelligence, became deeply disturbed by this change.

Stallman was faced with two choices. He could either bury his disquiet, get a job designing proprietary software, make lots of money doing so and eventually die a dissatisfied, unfulfilled and unhappy man.

Or he could build a resistance to proprietary software and have the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile. In October 1985 Stallman founded the Free Software Foundation. In this case the word 'free' does not mean 'free of cost' but is equivalent to 'free speech' and 'freedom to share' and 'freedom to cooperate'. In free software the code is kept open for others to alter and improve as long as they then release the new version also with the code.

The licensing systems created by this foundation became the basis of a movement that, in 1991, led to the creation of the World Wide Web – which gave us our present reality of millions of interlinked websites

and social media. Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the world wide web, is not a household name. Although he changed our world, he did it in ways that did not make him a billionaire – because he chose to keep the code of the protocols free instead of patenting it.

This story illustrates a much larger trend that you will encounter in most spheres of the economy. That is, a contest between cooperative energies that foster economic democracy and its counter is the tendency to concentrate power through the method of command and control.

In virtually every sector of the economy and society, you will find that the more easy opportunities may be in the old game of command and control.

But the more challenging, and more fulfilling, opportunities will be in finding new ways that are based on cooperation, win-win sharing of benefits and all that expands people's sense of agency, swaraj, rather than making them dependent on some larger power with which they cannot have a conversation as equals.

Whether it is renewable energy, or agricultural technology, or payment systems, or health care, or management of water resources – it is not enough to ask what is the most 'efficient' way to deliver services to the maximum number of people. It is far more important to ask which technology, which structure, will devolve power to the last person and do so in ways that do not concentrate power in the hands of a few at the top.

Speaking Truth to Power

Of course, in saying this, I am taking it as a given that we are all committed to building and deepening democracy. How does the journey of swaraj as self-control and self-confidence enable us, empower us to be active and creative participants to this epic endeavour?

It is commonly understood that Swaraj means the freedom to speak truth to power without fear of reprisals or suppression. But in practice what is much more important is to be able to speak truth to power without anger and resentment.

This is the crucial significance of the events in Champaran a hundred years ago.

When the District Magistrate of Champaran ordered Gandhiji to leave the area Gandhiji wrote, in a letter dated 16th April 1917, that he is 'unable to leave this district, but if it so pleases the authorities, I shall submit to the order by suffering the penalty for disobedience.'

[Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Volume 13, page 367. www.gandhiheritageportal.org]

Having said this Gandhiji could easily have proceeded to the villages to get on with his mission of studying the conditions there. But instead, the next day Gandhiji wrote another letter to the Magistrate stating that he would remain in Motihari and await summons.

There was ample reason to be enraged by what British rule had inflicted upon the people of Champaran. But Gandhiji was clear that opposition to that injustice must be anchored in a cold and confident determination to end the injustice not in the heat of anger.

The final lines of his statement before the Magistrate on 18th April explain why Gandhiji was able to do this:

'...I have disregarded the order served upon me, not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being -- the voice of conscience'.

[Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Volume 13, page 375. www.gandhiheritageportal.org]

You might well feel that this story belongs to a gentler time whereas we live in an age where aggressive expression of anger, resentment, hatred is celebrated – certainly in sections of social media.

Moreover, you are very likely to find that the 'power' you have to deal with is not just that of the State or private monied interests but also that of the vigilante mob be it pro-cow, anti-Romeo or whatever.

It may indeed seem as though your voice of conscience is feeble in the face of a mob or on-line trolls. Certainly, there are situations when State power, monied power or mob power crushes elementary humane values. And it is natural to feel enraged by such violations.

The question I invite you to ponder is this: does putting that anger into action really improve the situation or is it more likely to make it worse? Above all, does the anger make you stronger or does it deplete your ability to think clearly and act firmly to stop the injustice?

These are not purely abstract values. There are diverse, often indirect, efforts that uphold these ideals and put them into practice.

The village of MendhaLekha in Gadchiroli District of Maharashtra is famous for its powerful gram sabha and community-based forest management. But the most vital element of the MendhaLekha story is about the processes its people have created for speaking truth to power with firmness but not anger – whether the 'power' is that of the forest officials or gun-wielding Maoists.

[Further reading: <http://www.ceecec.net/case-studies/mendha-lekha-using-self-governance-to-achieve-ecological-prosperity-and-livelihood-security/>]

Far from the forests and tribal areas an urban network called *Moved By Love* is inspiring thousands of people to build their life and community on the basis of compassion, cooperation and generosity.

[Further reading: <http://www.movedbylove.org/>]

Another network known as Jeevan Vidya holds workshops that help people to resolve their inner conflicts to grow in self-command.

[Further reading:

<https://www.iitk.ac.in/infocell/announce/ncvejv/Jeevan%20Vidya%20Brief%20Introduction.pdf>]

Then there are voices like Respectism, which celebrate a culture of respect for all as the basis of a healthy and whole society. *[Further reading: <http://www.respectism.net/>]*

Relative to the society as a whole, these are all small efforts – but small like the tiny seed that gives birth to a mighty tree. If you ask whether such efforts, and many more that I am not aware of, are poised to bring about a transformation that causes more and more people to live by the 'voice of conscience' – my answer is that I don't know.

What I am convinced about is that the 'voice of conscience' is ever present – however distant or even absent it may seem in the mainstream of public life.

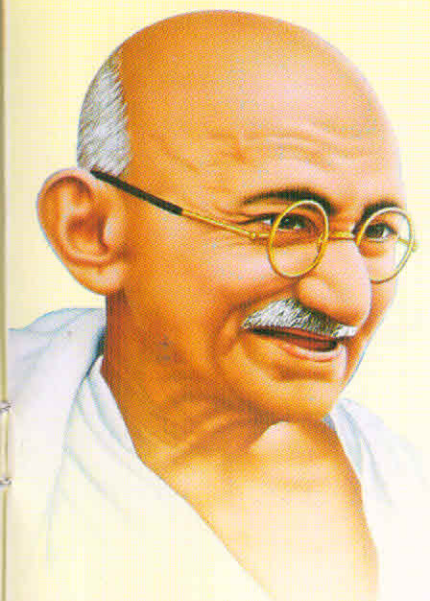
For those who think of swaraj as a destination this may offer no consolation.

You are beginning your professional life in a time of global turmoil, when economic systems and the earth's eco-systems are in deep crisis. Societies across the world are struggling with the complexity of technological and social change happening at a speed that our species has never experienced before.

May you be more excited than frightened by the times we live in. Precisely because the crises are so deep – there are also unprecedented opportunities for pioneering and brave work that can transform society, culture and economy to create a much better world for your children.

As I join your teachers, your parents and peers in wishing you every happiness and a fulfilling life, I hope that you can visualise Swaraj not as a destination but as a journey – both of the inner spirit and of external social-political engagement. Then the possibilities are truly endless. May every glimmer of hope, every experiment and endeavour to live by the voice of conscience, be a source of ever renewing life-long energy for you.

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Gandhiji's Voice of Conscience - A Century Later

"With the permission of the Court I would like to make a brief statement showing why I have taken the very serious step of seemingly disobeying the order passed under Section 144 Cr.P.C. In my humble opinion it is a question of difference of opinion between the local administration and myself. I have entered the country with motives of rendering humanitarian and national service. I have done so in response to a pressing invitation to come and help the ryots, who urge they are not being fairly treated by the indigo planters. I could not tender any help without studying the problem. I have, therefore, come to study it, with assistance, if possible, of the Administration and the planters. I have no other motive, and cannot believe that my coming can in anyway disturb public peace and cause loss of life. I claim to have considerable experience in such matters. The administration, however have thought differently. I fully appreciate their difficulty, and admit too that they can only proceed through information they received. As a law-abiding citizen my first instinct would be, as it were, to obey the order served upon me. But I could not do so without violence to my sense of duty to those for whom I have come. I feel I

could just now serve them only by remaining in their midst. I could not, therefore voluntarily retire. Amidst this conflict of duties I could only throw the responsibilities of removing me from them on the Administration. I am fully conscious of the fact that a person, holding, in public life of India, a position such as I do, has to be most careful in setting an example. It is firm believe that in the complex constitution under which we are living, the only safe and honourable course for the self-respecting man is, in the circumstances such as face me, to do what I have decided to do, that is, to submit without protest to the penalty of disobedience.

I venture to make this statement not in any way in extenuation of the penalty to be awarded against me, but to show that I have disregarded the order served upon me, not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience."

April 18, 1917

About Logo



सुविद्या सुविनियोगात् सुविकासः

The geometric approach signifies the rigour and discipline essential for any kind of development and growth. At the Centre is a solid square which portrays the institute and its strong inter-linkages with the external world, as seen by the four connecting routes to the outer octagonal shape. Four honeycombed shapes surrounding the solid square represent the key stakeholders - State, Civil Society, Markets and Community.

The leaf-like structures on all four corners signify an open book, strengthening the perception of an academic institution. The circles along with the leaves represent the blossoming of empowered graduates with an integrated learning of perspectives, operational competencies, and contextual understanding. The sharp yet dynamic form represents discipline, excellence, and mindful alertness.

Set in an earthly terracotta colour, the symbol portrays rootedness and humility with commitment to impart good education that, applied right, ushers in progressive well-being.

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