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Sethu Das / February 18, 2010

### Hind Swaraj and Common Sense

Even after years, two political pamphlets continue to inspire people all over the world. Sethu Das of Design & People looks at Mahatma Gandhi's '**Hind Swaraj**' and Thomas Paine's '**Common Sense**' — two historic Pamphlets that changed the fate of two colonies forever.



**IF** history writing is an art of methodologically narrating and documenting events of the past related to human race, forgetting is another art which enables us to forget the very same history, martyrs and their heroic deeds.

One of the biggest challenges for a modern-day reader is to choose the right literature to read from the millions of books and journals available. And in the process of choosing the right ones, we usually miss or even forget some of the most relevant ones. It has been said that even if all books on earth are lost, and one book — The Bhagavad Gita — survives, the world can still survive. And if there is one more book to be added in such a world, it could possibly be 'Hind Swaraj' or 'The Indian Home Rule', written by Mohandas K Gandhi in the year 1909. Because Hind Swaraj answers almost all our questions. Not many of us remember or read this sacred text today as it falls into the category of forgotten books. Probably what we are forgetting is also the fact that Hind Swaraj, one of the most important works Gandhi written hundred years ago while returning to South Africa from London is more relevant in today's conflict situation than ever before.

Prof Samdhong Rinpoche, Kalon Tripa (de facto, the Prime Minister) of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has been studying the Hind Swaraj for the last 21 years and carrying the booklet with him wherever he goes. He finds that whenever questions arise in his mind in the context of Tibet issue, he has been able to find an appropriate answer from 'Hind Swaraj'. During a Hind Swaraj reading organised by Friends of Tibet in 2002, Prof Rinpoche said: "For me 'Hind Swaraj' is equally important as that of Dhammapada and in many ways more important than Dhammapada, because my understanding of Dhammapada is through 'Hind Swaraj'. When I do not have any exposure to Gandhi's teachings, my understanding of Buddhism was general and the importance of Dhammapada was very limited." The comparison of a sacred Buddhist text with a British Raj-banned booklet took many Buddhists by surprise.

Not many Tibetans seem to be enthusiastic about understanding the relevance of Gandhi's text and in their current context. Some of them even believe that the non-violence preached by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his close associates in exile has nothing to do with Gandhi's active non-violence but pure inaction. But for people like the Dalai Lama and Prof Rinpoche, their commitment on non-violence is not simply a tactic or a method to win over the adversary, but a creed that motivates them to continue their non-violent struggle against the Chinese occupying forces. Rajiv Vora of Gandhi Peace Foundation who considers Prof Samdhong Rinpoche his 'guru' further clarifies: "I have witnessed Venerable Prof Rinpoche trying consistently and patiently to wash this charge of inactivity off non-violence. In our dialogues with Tibetan activists we have faced such questions too, and it is here that 'Hind Swaraj' comes to our aid. Non-violence comes out as a higher level of activity demanding fire and militancy. There is no swaraj without satyagraha." He continues: "It is through teachings in non-violence for freedom as explained in 'Hind Swaraj' that the declining support for non-violence could be revived, for it is only in Swaraj that Justice and freedom — the two innate human quests — are harmonised. All other ideologies and systems of governance create incompatibility between these two."

Prof Rinpoche who is completing his second term this year as the Prime Minister in exile feels that after reading Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj', his understanding of Buddhism and non-violence has immensely widened and became practical in every word. "It may be social, political and economic. Each one of the questions of life is dealt with correct answers. So this is the philosophy of life and this is the philosophy of spirituality in full time. Buddha had said at many times particularly in his Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings that worldly and spiritual appearance can be combined in one's individual life. Probably Gandhi is the only person in the modern history who clearly demonstrated that these two appearances can be combined in real life," Prof Rinpoche says.

#### Common Sense



On this site was buried / Thomas Paine / 1773...1809 / Author of Common Sense / The Pamphlet that stirred the American Colonies to Independence / John Adams said: "Without the pen of Paine the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain." / "History is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine." / Donated by Rowena Stillman in the 176th year of the American Revolution.

Whenever I read the 'Hind Swaraj', there is one name that comes to my mind quite often — Thomas Paine, a poor emigrant to America, whose 48-page 1776 pamphlet inspired a nation to lead a revolution to overthrow a colonial power. Thomas Paine's introductory statement "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of the mankind" is enough to understand that like Gandhi, he too understood the root cause of the problem. Both 'Hind Swaraj' by Mahatma Gandhi and 'Common Sense' by Thomas Paine had a common adversary — the British. Authors of both the revolutionary booklets believed in the cause of the oppressed section of the society and taught the population about the "natural disease of monarchy." When Gandhi illegally sold hundreds of thousands of Hind Swaraj copies on the streets of Bombay on a *hartal* day, 'Common Sense' had already broken all records in sales in the British colony. Both authors donated profits from their books to the struggle they believed. And both Hind Swaraj and Common Sense were banned by the British as these political literatures criticised the wars that cost lives and resources and challenged the monarchy.

When Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were immersed recently in the Indian Ocean after 62 years of his assassination, I once again remembered Thomas Paine, but this time for a different reason — his 'missing bones'.

Paine died on June 8, 1809 and his funeral was attended by few in a land which he refused to accept as a 'British nation', but a nation composed of peoples from all over Europe. Paine inspired millions with his powerful argument for American Independence from British. He was one of the only founding fathers of the United States to die in poverty and deny a burial at the Quaker

Cemetery. His unfortunate funeral was attended by just six people that included few African-Americans who came to pay tribute to the 'Englishman' who awakened a population. After ten years of his Paine's funeral, William Cobbett, an admirer of Paine's political philosophies made a plan to take his bones back to England to build a new resting place for Paine. Apparently, the remains never reached the destination as William Cobbett lost the bones, in a shameful incident. "That was the gratitude of England and America," the editor of Common Sense concludes.

Not many of us remember those who liberated us from the colonial powers. We continue to worship our founding fathers while ignoring and forgetting the very teachings and principles they had left behind for us to be inspired.

*"Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one."* Thomas Paine

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