



*Youth, Communities and
Swaraj – A Gandhian Lens*

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We are currently living through unprecedented times – an era filled with collective human experiences of trauma, loss, anxieties, fear and hopes. The pandemic has upended the world, triggered partly by the insatiable greed of humankind for more comfort and wealth and a conquering attitude towards Earth. Competition, rather than collaboration, became the coin of the realm. There has been a cavalier encroachment of the spaces of other living creatures. This condescension brought on this pandemic and with it, floundering economies, helpless governments, collapsing institutions, mounting mortality and global gloom and doom. It created massive migrations, deepening the marginalization and destitution of many vulnerable communities around the globe.

In such a moment of complete rupture, as we seek inspiring leaders to pull us out of this apocalypse. To help us bring about the much-needed change in the way we conduct our lives, who else to turn to but Mahatma Gandhi and his principles of Hind Swaraj? This timeless document, written by Gandhi in 1909, still stands as one of the finest blueprints for different civilizational practices.

Hind Swaraj is a commentary that is both a scholarly argument as well as an opinion anchored in few eternal truths that Gandhi believed in and lived. Some of the principles he talked about in that document are the fundamental principles of the working of Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research (PUKAR), as well as the foundation of nearly all PUKAR's programs and projects.

Hence, I take the liberty of quoting some of his thoughts, his ideas, his principles and how deeply PUKAR's work is influenced by it and how PUKAR has tried to implement those ideas in practice.

One thing this pandemic has taught us is that we cannot go on living the way we have been for the past 200 years. The modern industrialized world's practices, our arrogant exploitation of Earth's precious resources for our 'Greed and not our Needs', the onslaught of globalization and the deep inequalities created by its systems, the failure of economic and political systems to provide the basic necessities of life to every human being, as Gandhi had cautioned about in **Hind Swaraj**, the destitution of the marginalized and the exclusion of the rural poor – all these factors have brought us into this mess in the first place. The time has come to think, alter and gain "Swaraj" from our greed and our exploitative and lazy attitudes and to learn to build a mutually respectful relationship with Earth and all her creatures.

For Gandhi, **"It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves!"** (Pradhan, 1).

And for Gandhi, the basic aim of education should be to **"Bring our senses under our control and to help imbibe ethical behaviour in our life"** (Pradhan, 1).

At PUKAR, we believe that we can learn to rule ourselves only when we learn to understand ourselves as individuals. That is the principle we have used very successfully over the past 14 years in PUKAR's flagship program called Youth Fellowship. This 11-month long Fellowship creates a cadre of Community-Based Youth Leadership from five districts around Mumbai covering 26+ Million people. It empowers youth with participatory research skills to conduct research on problems in their own communities and come up with community-based solutions, thus becoming **changemakers in their own communities**. Youth originating mostly from subaltern communities are accepted as participants but only as a group.

The Youth Fellowship learning process has followed an alternative pedagogy of Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR), the mantra being 'Karake Sikho'. **Sustainable communities form a big part of SDGs and hence**

occupy centrality of space in discourses in every field. This has only strengthened our resolve to foster and scale up the Community Based Participatory Action Research.

Professor Arjun Appadurai, the Founder of PUKAR, in his seminal essay “Right to Research”, argues that Community Based Participatory Action Research “*democratizes research, gives credence to community based indigenous knowledge and enables the community members to have a voice in envisioning of their own future, thus making the communities sustainable*” (Appadurai 2006). This also devolves power and places it into the hands of local communities, urban or rural, which Gandhi strongly advocates in ***Hind Swaraj***.

Decentralization of power and inclusivity forms critical part of his argument in ***Hind Swaraj*** when he talks about villages. Gandhi also strongly advocates a self-reflective, inward-looking attitude towards one’s own identity in ***Hind Swaraj***. In PUKAR, this aspect forms the first step that all the participants have to take as soon as they join PUKAR’s Youth Fellowship.

Writing an autobiography and looking at one’s own life as a bystander is a difficult, yet essential, first activity that each youth is encouraged to undertake. Resolving struggles of layered identities through self-reflection and writing one’s own biography to know oneself better is usually an eye-opener for many. Engaging with prevalent social issues such as caste, religion, gender, language, region and cultural practices, reflecting upon one’s own space and location in their communities as youth, leaders, consumers and aspirants, and learning to negotiate all these positions under the prevalent social construct, are both frightening and liberating experiences for the Barefoot Researchers.

The realization that in many areas some of them are privileged, but that even victims of some social structures can be perpetrators within other social categories, especially in areas of gender and environment is a sobering thought for many. With the help of the expert resource persons, the ever-smiling Facilitators and Alu-mentors, the Barefoot Researchers walk through and reflect upon a maze of complexities. In addition, they are enabled with some of the most critical skills that are necessary to live a successful life in the 21st century. These include

problem location and problem solving, teamwork and cooperation, collective decision making and consensus building, critical thinking and empathy, many of the qualities Gandhi talks about in *Hind Swaraj*. He gives particular importance to local small technologies. In YFP that is exactly what is fostered. *Local problems, local small solutions, based upon evidence collected locally by the local youth and implemented locally.*

Let me share with you a few stories, of resolute-minded youth that were empowered through the Youth Fellowship and how they changed the lives of the people from their communities through their small but significant actions.

The Sexual Harassment Faced in Local Trains:

A group of young women who travelled by Mumbai's local train network to their colleges decided to explore the sexual harassment they all faced. In addition to interviewing many of their colleagues and attending colleges in the same vicinities as theirs, they also mapped and photo-documented the areas where they faced the most harassment.

Some stations and neighbourhoods around these stations stood out. Many of those areas shared one thing in common: the lack of enough lighting. The women shared this research and these maps with the railway authorities, requesting them to increase the lighting in these areas. Small improvements led to large dividends.

Improving Connectivity of A Village for Decreasing Deaths and Morbidity:

A youth group from Amboli conducted research on health mortality in their village. They found that a large number of deaths and non-institutional deliveries took place on the roads. People had to wait at the railway crossing gate since there was no overhead bridge. With local trains passing by frequently, people's lives were at risk. They shared this evidence with the local corporator who in turn shared the information with the respective authorities, who finally sanctioned a budget for an overhead bridge, thus bringing relief to their community.

To Continue My Education:

We had a spirited group of Adivasi youth from Kalomboli village. To reach this village, one has to first reach Khopoli by train, then take a bus for half an hour that drops one off at the bottom of a hilly region. From there, one has to endure an hour-long uphill walk to reach the village.

The village has a primary school up to the 4th grade. The entire village becomes vacant during summer since there is no drinking water. The villagers come down to the bottom of the hill to the brick kilns for work. Children who wish to continue their higher education have to walk to the school located in another village, which is a walk over a difficult terrain.

The PUKAR youth researched and documented the villagers' plight through photography that was taught to them at Youth Fellowship workshops. They used a camera, rather than smartphones, to take pictures. After the research and documentation was completed, they took the data to the bus service company and pleaded that the bus should come all the way to the bottom of the hill and take them to the other village so that at least a few of them could continue their education. The bus service staff agreed, which was a huge achievement for these youth.

We have many such stories to share of the 5,000-odd youth that we have trained in 14 years and the over 400 communities we have reached. Each of these stories echoes the same principle that Gandhi reiterated many times:

Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him or her. Will she or he gain anything by it? Will it restore the person to a control over his or her own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Gandhi always emphasized the importance of self-reliance and had deep-seated respect for manual labour. In one of his speeches during his tour in 1934 he

vowed, “We have to become speechless manual labourers living in the villages”. He believed that unless one does the manual labour oneself, one may never understand the efforts and pain behind it, and one may never learn to respect it and value it. Keeping this cardinal principle in mind, in PUKAR the entire team decided that we would undertake the cleaning of our office by ourselves. No outsider should clean the space that we use every day. So, once a month on a designated morning, all of us gather at the office, with brooms and cleaning material and water buckets. Over the next four–six hours, every nook and cranny of the office is cleaned, including the toilets. Listening to music and eating snacks in between, we make a joyous team outing of this activity and not only enjoy it but also value it. Gandhi’s influence does not ever seem to leave our horizons.

Another area where we have followed Gandhi is in our ability to build collaborations. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi talked specifically about “Curbing unnecessary competitiveness”. At PUKAR, this principle has been observed minutely. In everything we do, propose and implement, a spirit of collaboration and cooperation and equal treatment for all are encouraged. We have always believed strongly that synergy is the fuel that allows ordinary people to achieve extra-ordinary accomplishments. This word occupies a significant space in PUKAR’s organizational principles, from the daily functioning of the teams to research conducted by our Barefoot Researchers in teams of 10–12 youth.

Group work remains an important part of PUKAR projects. We believe that by working in teams, we learn to respect diversity of opinions and differences, resolve conflicts, learn to build consensus, gather the skills necessary to foster inclusion and democracy. We pool our strengths, capabilities, talents and creativity so that as a collective, we can achieve exponentially rather than individually. Our efforts are not just additive but multiplied. In each of our projects, this notion is fostered and executed with ease. Believing strongly that ground-breaking, inclusive partnerships will lead to synergies in every sphere of development will give measurable outcomes for the communities we work with.

So, where did we build our partnerships? All over. From the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, (MCGM) to the BMN College and Khalsa College of Mumbai, which cater mostly to lower middleclass students belonging mostly to minority

groups. From the prestigious Tata Institution of Social Sciences of Mumbai to globally renowned academic institutions like Harvard University, University of Chicago and Max Planck Institute of Germany. The main focus of these collaborations has always remained empowerment of youth through knowledge, skills and attitudinal changes.

Municipal schools draw some of the most deprived students from mostly migrant and marginalized communities. They lack information, knowledge and exposure on varied fronts, leading to a deep inferiority complex within many of them. PUKAR decided to address this issue by partnering with MCGM. The main focus of this partnership was to empower adolescent girl students of 7th and 8th grades with knowledge of puberty, menstrual health and hygiene, gender identity and gender violence. This triangulation between MCGM school students, communities & PUKAR lead to exhilarating outcomes not just for the girls and their mothers but also for our team members, who felt equally empowered with the spirit of disseminating knowledge.

Our collaboration with Harvard University led to exploring Social Determinants of Health in an informal settlement. This in turn led to increasing the immunization rates of children from 32% to 89.6% over 18 months with door-to-door education of mothers and collaboration with MCGM to bring health camps to this settlement. This research helped us to publish seven important papers published in peer reviewed international journals **that are cited more often than we had ever imagined.** (available on www.pukar.org.in)

Finally, one of the most difficult yet most rewarding partnership emerged between PUKAR's E-Governance team and rural tribal youth of 40+ villages in the tribal district of Palghar. This partnership has been difficult to execute mainly due to its massive scale, the hilly and inapproachable terrain and poor connectivity between the villages scattered across 150 kms. The PUKAR team members overcame all these hurdles with their resolute minds and determination. They inhabited the area for months, kept an ear to the ground through their Adivasi E-Sevaks, and were agile on the feet as the situations demanded.

The synergy of this partnership has brought about a revolutionary turnaround in the capacities of the rural population. The knowledge of the 73rd Amendment delivered to each and every household, the importance of the participation of tribal in the working of Gram panchayats, their demand of good governance from the Gram panchayat by raising their voices in Gramsabhas; all of this has been a new and exhilarating experience for the tribal villagers.

The schemes specifically created for tribals by the Government of India are being delivered to their doorsteps by our trained local E-Sevaks. The villagers get their Aadhar cards, voter registration cards, land ownership records and marriage certificates in their own villages without having to make multiple trips to the local district office. This not only saves them money and time but also spares them the humiliation they face at the hands of the officers, bankers, and office staff. This gift of dignity is beyond any measurable value to these tribal communities – which they have conveyed to their local E-Sevaks over and over again. And in this process, the villagers have also been empowered to attend the Self-Rule that Gandhi so deftly advocated.

According to Gandhi, there is a symbiotic relationship between swaraj as 'self-rule' of individual Indians and swaraj as the home-rule or self- government for the Indian people.

Through such partnerships, we have been collaborators, not competitors. We have been inclusive not exclusive. We have created synergies that are much larger than the sum total of our partners and us. The real beneficiaries of these energies and synergies are not just all of us but the marginalized and disenfranchised, repressed and oppressed, the ostracized and excluded, voiceless and invisible citizens of our country – the millions of people Gandhi cared for the most! He upheld that individuals can be free if India were free.

To Gandhi, the recognition of the responsibility of duty was the very essence of freedom.

For Gandhi freedom did not come by exploiting others, for such exploitation is merely power in the narrow sense. Instead, freedom is about making choices

that go beyond the self without excluding any person or community. Freedom is ecological.

That is what we have been trying to inculcate in the community-based youth. To look beyond themselves to their communities, cities, countries and nature. As social beings, we must learn to respect the importance of communities as social units and their space in shaping our lives. Social media cannot replace social communities. Technology that creates band-aid solutions but fails to ask questions as to why the situation has been created in the first place cannot become a panacea for our problems. It can complement our efforts but not replace it.

In today's interdependent world that has been capsized by a tiny micro-organism, connected by the internet and yet divided by increasing inequality, endangered by cyclones, tsunamis, floods, drought, forest fires, hunger and malnutrition, and steeped in the mirage of technology as the ultimate solution, we need Gandhi's ideas of Swaraj and Freedom.

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