



Rereading 'Swaraj in Ideas'

August 15, 2025

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A classic essay shows the path to India establishing itself as a civilizational state.

This Independence Day, August 15, Indians and those interested in India, ought to read an essay that provides a fundamental framework for understanding India as a civilizational state. In the usual apathetic style of colonial India, this essay remained unpublished in the lifetime of the man who authored it as a lecture in 1931.

Krishna Chandra ('K. C.') Bhattacharya (1875-1949) was a noted philosopher born in a family of Sanskrit scholars and theologians; his father was a well-regarded philosopher too. Taught at Presidency College, he was educated at the University of Calcutta, and was a lifelong student of the Vedanta.

But his most powerful work is perhaps a speech Bhattacharya gave at the Sir Ashutosh Memorial Lecture, in honour of the Bengali polymath who died in 1924, and which came to be known as *Swaraj in Ideas* in 1931 – the same year when revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were hung by the British administration, and another Chandrashekhar Azad died in a faceoff with the colonial police.

Contrary to popular belief, India's elucidation of its civilizational identity is not new. Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vinayak Savarkar, Madan Mohan Malviya, Rishi Aurobindo, the list of civilizational champions before and during the freedom movement is long. After independence, India focused more on ideas like post-colonial solidarity, and the dream of socialist modernism but the civilizational assertion has returned with the Narendra Modi era.

The civilizational context is often explained through history. India's more than 5,000 years of historical legacy is cited as bedrock of its civilizational identity. But what Bhattacharya understood nearly a hundred years ago is equally urgent. He urged for eschewing any simplistic 'East meets West' fusion or synthesis, and saw – long before any critique of globalization – that the world was far from flat, and was likely to remain undulating.

Bhattacharya, of course, was the citizen of a country under colonial yoke and yet like Vivekananda, he saw that a blind embrace of colloquial Western culture could not bring India its rightful future. A Kantian scholar, Bhattacharya was no nativist. But he was one of the earliest to discern that superficial universalism would be futile.

“We speak also a little too readily of the demand for a synthesis of the ideals of the East and the West. It is not necessary in every case that a synthesis should be attempted. The ideals of a community spring from its past history and from the soil: they have not necessarily a universal application, and they are not always self-luminous to other communities. There are ideals of the West which we may respect from a distance without recognizing any specific appeal to ourselves. Then again there are ideals that have a partial appeal to us, because they have an affinity with our own ideals, though still with a foreign complexion. What they prescribe to us is to be worshipped in our own fashion with the ceremonials of our own religion. The form of practical life in which an ideal has to be translated, has to be decided by ourselves according to the genius of our own community. A synthesis of our ideals with western ideals is not demanded in every case. Where it is demanded, the foreign ideal is to be assimilated to our ideal and not the other way. There is no demand for the surrender of our individuality in any case: Svadharme nidhanam śreyah paradharmo bhayavahah,” wrote Bhattacharya.

The Sanskrit shloka is useful to understand. It is from the Bhagavad Gita and it says it is better to die fulfilling one's own duty or purpose while attempting to follow someone else's is dangerous.

One of the great lessons in the act of learning that India needs to embrace is that the path to a \$10 trillion dollar, third-ranked economy which is a major defence exporter is both arduous and lonesome. And it cannot be done without a framework shift; this is why the Chinese talk about 'capitalism, with Chinese characteristics'. A country of the size, scope and span of India can only become rich 'as itself', and not by transplanting context-agnostic notions of progress.

Like the glass façade skyscrapers that some Indian cities now showcase as 'development' - in one of the warmest parts of the world - a lack of context only begets excrescence.

Swaraj (self-rule or liberation) in ideas requires the reframing of Indian national progress with a new vocabulary of aspiration which drapes our hopes, fears, and dreams within our cultural perspective, rich with our local idioms and idiosyncrasies. No matter the borrowed -ism, the -stics would have to remain indigenous. This process has only just begun.

Author Biography

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