
UNIT 4 GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The modern Indian political discourse, which begins with Rammohun Roy, had distinctively a social connotation which only transformed itself into a political one after the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. The philosophy of early Indian nationalism focused more on the social rather than on the political because of the deep social cleavages and the unevenness in which the modern notion like a nation looked far fetched. For instance, Rammohun talks of continued Indian subordination and freedom from the British after 150 years. After Rammohun we find a larger assertion in the context of an assertion of an Indian identity, yet, like Surendranath Bannerjee, the general proposition was that India is not yet a nation but a nation in making.

At this time, during the last quarter of the 19th century, there was a crystallisation of the philosophy of cultural nationalism manifested mainly in Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. Dayananda talks of a glorious Indian past declaring the *Vedas* to be the epic source of knowledge for the whole of humankind but within this revivalist philosophy, he is also conscious of the degeneration and the need for reform and creation of a new Indian identity. In this formulation there is a reflection of a great deal of British impact when he characterises the British as being superior as they exude confidence in their dress, language and culture. Most importantly the British honour the idea of contract in their personal relations. In the context of contemporary India under colonial subjugation, he wants a cultural awakening and integration preaching equality as the core of the Indian tradition and propagating *swadeshi* and *Hindustani* as the lingua franca of the country. Dayananda's general argument is to prove the point that the Indians are in no way inferior to the British and within the framework of a revivalist past, it is quite possible to envisage a better future of India as a nation. Vivekananda, articulating another important dimension of a dialectical co-relationship, finds the western civilisation and the Indian civilisation being only partially complete because the West is deficient in spirituality whereas India lacks a tradition of modern education and scientific enquiry.

By the time Gandhi entered the political arena in India via his long and fruitful experiments in truth in South Africa, the debate between the Moderates and the Extremists was virtually

over and the debate over the primacy of the social or of the political was resolved. By this time, with the widespread influence of the reform movements and the nationalist struggle that had exerted on the Indian mind many of the European conceptions and articulations; these became an integral part of the nationalist discourse with the Mahatma becoming the representative and unifying force. He dismisses the idea that the attributes of a nation in India are of a recent origin and especially due to the imprint of British colonialism. Following the spirit of earlier cultural nationalism, he traces back to the ancient Indian heritage to demonstrate that the idea of the Indian nation not only in its rudimentary form but also in the context of certain fulfilment existed much before either the idea of nationalism or the nation-state originated in the West. That the great places of pilgrimage spread all over India and the saints who, by their acts of sacrifice and perseverance, ceased to be local or regional and became national was an enough indication that India was a nation much before the British rule.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- Gandhi's perception of India as a nation
- Gandhi's assessment of British political institutions and practices
- Gandhi's concept of self-rule and how it should bridge the gap between the elite and the masses

4.2 INDIA AS A NATION

Gandhi rejects the popular perception that 'India has become a nation under the British rule' and disputes the claim of those who argue that India is a nation after the British introduced western ideas and to the changes brought about by the modern means of communication such as the railways and the telegraph. This view, he dismisses, is the British interpretation of Indian history and points out in the *Hind Swaraj* (1909) "I hold this to be mistake. The English have taught us that we were not one nation before and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundations. We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that we were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently, they divided us" (p.46).

Gandhi's claim that India is nation is based on two assumptions: the first is that ancient Indian civilisation has a capacity to accommodate diversity and plurality and the second is that in the ancient India, the acharyas, in establishing certain places of pilgrimage, laid the basis for the evolution of an all India consciousness. The Ancient civilisation of India was predominantly Hindu in character but it was open to non-Hindu values and ideas. Gandhi highlights the accommodative capacity of India to fuse new ideas and values with its ancient civilisation over several centuries. As for the second assertion, Gandhi points out that pilgrim centres like Haridwar in the North and Rameshwaram in the South and Jagannath in the East were established not merely for religious benefit but "to create and sustain a sense of common identity among Indians scattered over an immense territory...they saw that India was one undivided land so made by nature. They, therefore, argued that it must be one nation. Arguing thus, they established holy places in various parts of India, and fired the people with an idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world".

According to Gandhi, India's strength lies in the unity amidst its diversity. He acknowledges the existence of many languages and dialects and insists that all provincial languages of Sanskrit and Dravidian stock should be replaced by *Devanagari*. Until one script is formalised, Hindustani could be used as the *lingua franca* with the option of either Persian or Nagari characters and "when the hearts of two meet, the two forms of the same language will be fused together, and we shall have a resultant of the two, containing as many Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic or other words as may be necessary for its full growth and full expression".

Writing about India as the home to many religions, Gandhi says "India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. The country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dream-land. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians, who have made India their country, are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religious synonymous terms, nor has it ever been so in India".

To the question posed by the Reader in the *Hind Swaraj* as to whether the "introduction of Mahomedanism not unmade the nation? Indian civilisation may have supplied a basis for a common identity in the pre-Islamic period; but now we have Mahomedans, Parsis and Christians. Our very proverbs prove it. The Muslims turn to the West for worship, and the Hindus to the East; the Muslims kill cows, the Hindus worship them. The Muslims do not believe in ahimsa, while the Hindus adhere to it. We thus meet with differences at every stop. How can India be one nation?" Gandhi is aware of the factual differences between the Hindus and Muslims but does not consider these differences serious enough to prevent the emergence of composite nationalism. He does not see the presence of Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs and Christians as a challenge to Indian civilisation but as an opportunity to allow for accommodation. Furthermore, he also underlines that religion as a sect ought not be the basis of nationality: India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation".

On the question of language Gandhi rejects the Macaulay's concept of the role of English language in India; the primacy desired of the mother-tongue or what the *Hind Swaraj* calls provincial language and the desirability of using Hindustani as the *lingua franca* of India. In a letter to Lord Amthill, Gandhi declares: "I no longer believe as I used to in Lord Macaulay as a benefactor through his Minute on education". In the *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi writes "the foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us". Subsequently, he accuses the English-knowing Indians for having enslaved India and says "the curse of the nation will rest not upon the English but upon us". He rejects Macaulay's thesis that Sanskrit and Persian have no foundational value for the Indian civilisation in the future and that English should replace them and become the new foundation language of modern India. If the English language is given this cultural role it is tantamount to committing national suicide. Indians, who look upon English language as the foundation of the new Indian culture, are enslaving and not liberating India. He rejects Macaulay's perception of English as the foundation of Indian civilisation but acknowledges the practical role played by English in ensuring the needs of scientific education and inter-provincial communication.

Gandhi insists that the mother-tongue has to be the primary basis of the cultural life of each 'province' while he realises that English has to be used to bring about the further growth of the mother-tongue. In the *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi says unequivocally that "we have to improve all our languages. What subjects we should learn through them not be elaborated here. Those English books which are valuable we should translate into the various Indian languages". He also provides another insight that English should be the language of scientific education and the mother-tongue as the language of ethical education. Gandhi is stressing on how there exists a divide between the English speaking elite and the masses who speak their respective mother-tongues in India and how this divide results in social differentiation and a feeling of superiority among the elite and inferiority among the masses. It is this nefarious tendency of the new Indian elite that he is criticising and not the knowledge of the English language as such. He is aware of its benefits in the areas of communication and scientific progress and stresses on the need to place English within the framework of Indian nationalism. He insists on the need to improve all Indian languages.

Gandhi opts for Hindi with the option of writing it in Devanagari or Persian script as the *lingua franca* for India and emphasises that 'every cultured Indian will know in addition to his own provincial language; if a Hindu, Sanskrit; if a Mahomedan, Arabic; if a Parsee, Persian, all Hindi. Some Hindus should know Arabic and Persian; some Mahomedans and Parsees, Sanskrit. Several Northerners and Westerners should learn Tamil'.

Gandhi consistently advocated States based on language. In 1918, when a proposal for the linguistic re-distribution of India was defeated in the Imperial Legislature, Gandhi wrote to the person who proposed the move: "Your idea is excellent but there is no possibility of its being carried out in the present atmosphere". Three years later he told the Home Rule League that "to ensure speedy attention to people's needs and development of every component part of the nation", they should "strive to bring about a linguistic division of India". Congress committees were created based on mother-tongue and that gave a tremendous encouragement to the national movement. Gandhi is confident that Indian nationalism has a golden opportunity to teach something new to the world, namely the model of a functioning multi-lingual and multi-religious nation.

Gandhi repeatedly stressed, like Rammohun and Vivekananda, on religious pluralism and on the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. He earnestly pleads with his followers to 'remember that his own religion is the truest to every man even if it stands low in the scales of philosophical comparison'. His encounter with the missionaries in South Africa played a crucial part in the development of his ideas. Their willingness to discuss religious issues with Gandhi makes him realise the importance of religion and makes him see the positive and negative side to their teachings. On the positive side, he adopts the evangelical outlook that God guides people and shares their belief that organisations like the Church and other voluntary associations should become instruments for reforming society and alleviating human miseries. However, he could not reconcile to their narrow view that one particular religion alone could be true and considers this as their most serious limitation. He rejects religious conversion as an ethical failure to think that it is the duty of any religion to remove persons from another religion is a violation of the integrity of family and community relationships.

4.3 ASSESSMENT OF THE CONGRESS AND THE BRITISH POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES

In the *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi makes an assessment of the Indian National Congress from its inception till 1909. Chapters 1-3 and part of Chapter 20 is devoted to this subject. To the Reader's assertion that the young in India are indifferent to the Congress as they think of it as an instrument for perpetuating British rule and the need to abandon the constitutional mode of agitation, and to adopt violence, Gandhi points out that despite its inadequacies, the Congress was the first institution that has "enthused us with the idea of nationality". It has brought together Indians from different parts of India and has insisted that the "Nation should control revenue and expenditure" and "has always desired self government after the Canadian model" and has given us "a foretaste of Home Rule". It would be improper to be dismissive of the Congress as that would "retard the fulfilment" of the final object of attaining *true swaraj*.

Gandhi pays tribute to Dadabhai Naoroji as the "Father of the Nation" and the "author of Nationalism and that his drain theory has taught us how the "English had sucked our life blood. Gokhale's embrace of poverty is out of his sense of patriotism and Tyabji "through the Congress, sowed the seed of Home Rule". He insists that "a nation that is desirous of securing Home Rule cannot afford to despise its ancestors". Gandhi also endorses the role played by Hume and Wedderburn in the rise and development of Congress nationalism and does not see anything inconsistent if the Indians and British could work together and nourish Indian nationalism. He acknowledges that "many Englishmen desire Home Rule for India". The British who have made India their home deserve fair treatment which the Extremists and the Revolutionary nationalists deny. Gandhi also dismisses in the *Hind Swaraj*, the extremists as retrograde and irresponsible and terms the anarchists and the terrorists as a lunatic fringe of the Indian political scene. Rejecting both these two positions he supports the programme, ideals and the methods of the moderate elements in the Congress in India.

Gandhi established the Natal Indian Congress modelled after the Indian National Congress in South Africa and followed strictly the well known British practice of 'prayer, petition and protest'. In the footsteps of the early liberals like Rammohun, Gokhale and Surendranath Bannerjee, Gandhi acknowledges that the British connection with India is providential and that Indians are actually "proud to be under the British crown because they think that England will prove India's deliverer". Gandhi, like the early liberals, had total faith in the 'British love of justice and fair play' and the British constitutional practice of equality before law applies not just to British citizens but for all. Racial discrimination is 'Un British' and does not have the sanction of the British constitutional practice. He differentiates between the localisms of the British bureaucracy in India from the larger British constitutional practice. He idolises the British constitution as it guarantees individual freedom and racial equality. He desires that India graduate to equal partnership with the Empire and by helping the British, India could qualify for *swarajya* or self-rule.

During his stint in South Africa, Gandhi tried to remind the British that racial discrimination is a violation of the letter and spirit of the British constitution. His technique of *Satyagraha* is also an offshoot of his understanding of both British history and character. Convinced that redress of grievances could be expected only when people demonstrate their willingness to suffer to getting relief underlines his philosophy of *satyagraha*. Taking a leaf from the British Suffragists, he asks the Indians in South Africa to emulate them by developing a capacity

to endure suffering. Gandhi points out to the century-long struggle laced with suffering and sacrifice that the British women waged to secure the right to vote and which eventually compelled the British government to concede to the demand of the Suffragists. Many years later, he recollects that “an Englishman never respects you till you stand up to him. Then, he begins to like you. He is afraid of nothing physical, but he is mortally afraid of his own conscience, if even you appeal to it and show him to be in the wrong. He does not like to be rebuked for wrong doing at first, but he will think over it, and it will get hold of him and hurt him till he does something to put it right”.

Gandhi is categorical that the technique of *Satyagraha* is most effective if used against the British though it could be used everywhere and be an alternative to war in resolving conflict. Writing in 1904, he observes “Earnestness commands success everywhere. It does so much more in the British Dominions. If the British machinery is slow to move, the genius of the nation being conservative, it is also quick to perceive and recognize earnestness and unity”. Reflecting on this again in 1907, he points out that the British would concede if the people are willing to sacrifice even their lives for the cause. But they would ignore even the genuine demands, when they are merely verbal. Even in their own country the British follow the same principles. South Africa also teaches him two other basic lessons which he implements in India and they are: (a) united struggle of all irrespective of caste, creed and religion and (b) the sublime importance of open non-violent struggle.

Gandhi's innate respect for the British sense of justice continued even after his return to India and, during the First World War, he recruited soldiers for the British army unconditionally whereas, both Tilak and Jinnah refused to do so without any advancement of the nationalist cause. This confidence which he had in the ultimate British sense of justice was shattered by the horrors of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. However, in spite of this shock and his overall criticism of Western civilisation, and the parliamentary system, he proclaimed in 1921, that his immediate aim was parliamentary *swaraj*, whereas the rest was for a distant future. His faith in the British sense of fair play was shaken but not his faith about the feasibility of the essential mechanism of the British parliamentary institutions.

4.4 SELF-RULE: NEED TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELITE AND THE MASSES

For Gandhi, Nationalism meant self-rule in which the whole community and not just the elite would be free and active; in which soul force and not brute force is the basis of public order and in which national interest is the supreme ethical criterion of state action. He rejects the proposition that a government by national elite is beneficial simply because it is a government by the national elite as evident from his virulent criticism of the Indian princes whose tyranny is worse than that of the British. Reminding the Reader in the *Hind Swaraj*, he points out “you will admit that the people under several Indian princes are being ground down. The latter mercilessly crush them. Their tyranny is greater than that of the English”. Similarly he rejects the violent methods of Revolutionary nationalists by criticism of Madan Lal Dhingra and says ‘those who will rise to power by murder will certainly not make the nation happy’. He insists that the soul force is more effective than brute force and cites the example of Tulsidas' message of *daya* (compassion) as the true ultimate basis of *dharma*. He is pragmatic enough to understand that state violence cannot be completely eliminated but suggests that whatever violence the state may have to exercise must be exercised in the interest of the people as a whole, and not just in the interest of the national elite and that too, strictly within the parameters of *daya*. He stresses on the right balance between *daya*

and national interest. The error of modern nationalism is its separation which is why the elite act in a manner that is detrimental to the masses.

In defining a nation, Gandhi advances the real meaning of *swaraj* as mental condition and an external condition. As mental condition it means: (1) inner liberation from the temptations of greed and power which modern civilisation offers; (2) freedom from hatred towards the national 'enemy', the British and (3) of active love for the Indian masses. *Swaraj* as external condition is (1) political independence from alien domination and (2) of life-long dedication to the task of improving the material conditions of poverty and caste oppression of the Indian people.

Swaraj is not replacing the English sahibs with Indian 'brown' sahibs as that is tantamount to 'English rule without the Englishman; of wanting the tiger's nature but not the tiger; of making India English and when that happens it will be called not Hindustan but Englishstan'. He reminds of Mazzini's vision of freedom which involves the whole of Italian people different from that of Garibaldi and his associates of merely driving the Austrians by force of arms. Gandhi says "I am sure you do not wish to reproduce such a condition (as that of modern Italy) in India... I believe that you want the millions of Indians to be happy, not that you want the reins of Government in your hands".

Swaraj is not merely getting rid of the British but also the fascination for modern civilisation which teaches the Indian elite to oppress the Indian people. The *Hind Swaraj* proposes nineteen points in the last chapter that involves the moral transformation of the Indian elite and addresses it to the professional classes- the doctors, lawyers, scientists, administrators, politicians and business executives- to become instruments of service to the nation first and aspiring for money or status as secondary. The pursuit of *artha* or money has to be within the framework of *dharma* which means adopting machinery for national development that is conducive to the health of the body and soul, the well-being of the weak and the poor and not just the wealthy and the powerful. Gandhi's stress on *Khadi* symbolises this requirement. *Swaraj* means self-reform, constitutional reforms and economic reforms. His commitment to truth as he sees it teaches him to appreciate the beauty of compromise which he underlines as the essence of *satyagraha*. There is close link between *swaraj* and *satyagraha* as the latter is the key to the realisation of the former. The former is self-rule and the latter is the way in which the individual, through voluntary self-sacrifice may gain control over himself. Extended into the political realm, it strengthens the individual soul force as he offers civil disobedience against the government. Stressing on ends and means, Gandhi insists that the lofty goal of *swaraj* is attained only if there is the purest of means.

Gandhi's ideal with the village as the basis of *swaraj* underlines the message of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. The ideal village should produce its own food and cloth; should have reserve for its cattle, playgrounds for adults and children, its own theatre, school and water works. Each activity in it will be carried on cooperative basis. "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or Panchayat having full powers... self sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world".

In 1931, Gandhi outlined the nature of legislative organisation for the Indian nation in his speech at the Second Round Table Conference as follows: 'each village would elect its own representatives to form an electorate for further election to the central or the federal legislature. It would be analogous to the pattern for the constitution of the All India Congress Committee where the villages elect their own little committees and these in turn

would elect the taluk committees, followed by district councils which elect provincial councils. These would finally send their members to the central legislature. Only the villages could be practitioners of *swadeshi*; the villagers earn their bread labour and lead simple lives in the absence of machinery, doctors, railways and lawyers, and markets selling consumer goods'.

Tagore criticises Gandhi's directives regarding them to be medieval. The emphasis on simplicity would retard economic development, as the narrow form of *swadeshi* would result in restrictive provincial attitude, isolationism and provide unnecessary hostility in the rest of the world. He does not agree with Gandhi's assertion that 80% of the Indian people were peasants and that for six months in a year they did not have meaningful work. It is neither wise that the middle class spend their free time spinning the yarn. He questions the desirability of the spinning-wheel. Tagore is convinced that Gandhi's plans would lead to India's isolation preventing western knowledge and advancement from reaching India. In response to these charges, Gandhi replied that Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive. It is health-giving, religious and therefore humanitarian. He defends the use of spinning-wheel as that is the only way to 'realise' the essential and living oneness of interest among India's myriads. Its purposes are to symbolise 'sacrifice for the whole nation'. Regarding narrow provincialism and the dangers of this kind of nationalism, Gandhi says: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown off my feet by any". Gandhi does not regard his patriotism to be exclusive: 'it is calculated not to hurt any other nation but to benefit all in the true sense of the word. India's freedom as conceived by me can never be a menace to the world". Gandhi sees nation as consisting of individual human components and not, as Dalton states it, "as a transcendent entity, possessed of a soul and a form of freedom of its own. He thinks of *swaraj* first in terms of the individual and then in terms of society. He says '*swaraj* of the people means the sum total of the *swaraj* (self-rule) of individuals. He also stresses on social reform for attaining *swaraj* and foremost among the aims of social reform are what he calls the three pillars of *swaraj*: Hindu-Muslim unity, the abolition of untouchability and the uplift of India's villages.

4.5 CONCLUSION

Jayantnuja Bandhopadhyaya identifies six ideals of Indian nationalism and these are: (1) anti-imperialism (2) anti-racism (3) Asianism (4) internationalism (5) non-violence and (6) democracy. These ideals found their fullest exposition under Gandhi's leadership. It is the strength of these ideals that prevented the international communist movement from making any significant headway in India between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and Independence of India in 1947. The two most important ideological points of Indian nationalism are anti-imperialism and democracy and for most, non-violence a tactic rather than a policy. Anti-imperialism remains the fundamental aim of Indian nationalism.

The Marxists by accusing Gandhi of being bourgeois overlooked his role as a social critic and his protest against existing inequalities and the constructive programmes aimed at eliminating existing social evils. For Gandhi the causes of disparities in the Indian society are due to imperialistic exploitation and the limitation of the capitalist industrialised civilisation of the West. By concentrating on the political aspects of his personality, the Marxists missed the critic Gandhi, who felt deeply the acute disparities in the Indian society and tried to resolve them in his own way. Nirmal Kumar Bose argues that Gandhi defies classification as the prophet of bourgeois nationalism in India. First, the means that Gandhi employed are

such that they will lead successfully to the end only if the masses become self-acting towards the latter part of the revolution. And the chances are that if the masses gain success through their fully developed conscious strength, they will also refuse to be exploited in future by anybody who wishes to ride upon their back. Second, Gandhi did not want India to benefit at the expense of any other nation. He considered humanity as one family. Therefore, according to Bose, Gandhi transcended bourgeois nationalism.

Gandhi, like Vivekananda and Aurobindo, accepts the proposition that it is in the nature of man to struggle for self-realisation or spiritual freedom. This is the highest aim of the individual and how he attains the conquest of his self is the key to success. Gandhi also stresses that political independence by itself is incomplete unless accompanied by a moral or spiritual transformation of the individual in society. Not only does Gandhi insist on moral progress but also in the elimination of slave mentality. Equally important is the social reform, with the help of constructive programme, to realising the three pillars of *swaraj* and thus establishes close link between freedom and social harmony.

4.6 SUMMARY

Gandhi rejects the popular perception that 'India has become a nation under the British rule' and disputes the claim of those who argue that India is a nation after the British introduced western ideas and to the changes brought about by modern means of communication such as the railways and the telegraph. His claim that India is nation is based on two assumptions of an all India consciousness. He insists on the need to encourage Indian languages and developing Hindustani as the *lingua franca* and the mother-tongue has to be the primary basis of the cultural life of each 'province'. Gandhi pleads for religious pluralism and allowing every religion to freely profess and practice what they consider as truth. Gandhi also dismisses in the *Hind Swaraj*, the extremists as retrograde and irresponsible and terms the anarchists and the terrorists as a lunatic fringe of the Indian political scene. Rejecting both these two positions he supports the programme, ideals and the methods of the moderate elements in the Congress in India. For Gandhi, Nationalism means self-rule in which the whole community is involved and not just the elite. Gandhi insisted on moral progress and the elimination of slave mentality. Equally important is social reform with the help of constructive programme to realising *swaraj* and thus establishes close link between freedom and social harmony.

4.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- 1) How does Gandhi perceive India as a nation?
- 2) What is Gandhi's assessment of the Indian National Congress?
- 3) Why did Gandhi admire the British political institutions and practices?
- 4) What does Gandhi mean by self-rule?
- 5) Why does Gandhi insist that there is a need to bridge the gap between the elite and the masses to bring about self-rule?

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