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Thoughts and Contribution of Swami Vivekananda: A Political Review

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with a comprehensive study on the thoughts and contributions of Swami Vivekananda. His contributions had far reaching effects which had re-modeled the Indian thought-world and worked for the moral and spiritual upliftment not only of the Indians but also of the humanity at large.

Introduction

The highly intellectual way of thinking matured in its very sophisticated forms during the 19th century, as a consequence to the Western intervention in the India's socio-cultural and politico-economic fields. The inspiration of this new kind of assertion not only came from regional literary campaigns but also a sharp response of the sluggish political outlooks of national level political drama in colonial India. Both this elements benefited a discursive field for defining the Indian nation in terms of its distinctness vis-à-vis to others. Informed by orientalism, as it sought to invoke an imagined the golden past and seriously fill up the blank pages of our nationalist narratives in acute patriotic passions, one of the most leading voices of this formidable project was Swami Vivekananda. He made a distinct intervention in this ideological discourse by introducing the idea of an 'alternative manliness', combine with Western notion of masculinity and the Brahmanic tradition of spiritual celibate ascetism with his missionary romanticism (Chakraborty, 2014).

Thus, in the annals of modern Indian thought, there have been but few individuals whose life and thought have been open to such diverse interpretations and who themselves were inclined to continuously redefining or reformulating their lives and their objectives (Sen, 2011). Vivekananda in one hand rejected political praxis; on the other hand, the imperial government admitted that he as the philosopher of the revolutionary movement in India (Sedition Committee Report, 1973). In fact, Vivekananda is to his all appearances known to many, even to the so - called scholars, as a monk, a close disciple of Sri Ramkrishna, a religious preacher, the founder of the Ramkrishna Math and Mission, master of sister Nivedita etc. (Nandi, 2001). In reality, he was a comprehensive personality, although of athletic muscular build, he had a mystic consciousness like Plotinus and Spinoza attuned with the absolute of the monistic idealists. Simultaneously, he was also a great intellectual at home in the secrets of metaphysical Vedantism, European philosophy with the elements of modern science and had a burning enthusiasm for the alleviation of human suffering (Verma, 1961).

Yet, Vivekananda lived for less than forty years; his life ought to be judged not by its length but its richness and intensity. Nevertheless, his life goes in smooth line, a good part of which was spent in hardship and self-denial, and it was committed to a cause that consumed it prematurity (Sen, 2011: 95). He was born in a kayastha family in Kolkata. His pre-monistic name was Narendranath. At the age of eighteen, he came into contact with Ramkrishna Paramhansa who exercised an immense influence on the shaping of his ideas and future activities. Narendranath accepted Ramkrishna as his teacher; and after the death of the latter, he along with other disciples of Ramkrishna started to live as Sanyasi and later assumed the name Vivekananda. Thus, he received international attention after his famous speech at the World

Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. After some time, he started the Ramakrishna Math and Mission at Belur, near Calcutta for carrying the message of resurgent Indian spirituality with active participation in the alleviation of human suffering.

Vivekananda and His basic Ideological Position

The rich tradition of Indian political discourse however, can broadly divide into two parts; one of these is a tradition which continues the heritage taking into account the compulsions of modern times. The chief concern to this tradition is to think of the problems of society, state and the individuals in terms of the insights contained in the Indian thought building process; as also in the light of modern conditions as well as ideas received from the west. On the other hand, a tradition of thinking wants to evaluate orthodox argumentations in the lights of the western rationalism. But the problem is that, both these traditions are not exclusive, rather, the first one, seeks to take over the best elements of liberal and socialist traditions and integrate them with the traditions of thought in the country itself, and the other one taking over the western notions and seek to assimilate traditional notions with them. While the first accept politics as the hinge of social process, the other regard it as one of the practices entrusted with the task of regulation of social life so that it is enabled, on its own, to achieve spiritual ends (Mehta, 1999).

To properly understand these two trends we must go to the ideas of Vivekananda who for a generation epitomized the best in all tradition, who was in his lifetime, as quote Aurobindo, “the leading exemplar and the most powerful exponent of the philosophy of preservation by reconstruction” (Ghosh, 1951). In fact, he gave a new direction to the interpretation of the earlier intellectual theorization, virtually never before declared with such insight, depth and vehemence since antiquity. It is noted that, there is always a very close resemblance between his vision and that of the antiquity. His positive outlook on life and society was the complete creative interpretation of the philosophical classics, which once again sought to combine the noetic to the pneumatic through a theological argument (Mehta, 1999: 169). However, the best part of his intellectual curiosity is based on his advocacy to cognitive idealism. The ever coincident blissful reality was to him the supreme extent and the eternal real and could be realized as a result of ontological developments of philosophical thrusts. His epistemological analysis follows the orthodox Vedantic formulation and reached his own conclusion into this. He pointing out that all the knowledge, that we receive from outside is not a mathematical addition, but simply the occasion for the removal of obstacles so that the innate pure consciousness may shine forth in all its resplendence and luminosity (Verma, 1961: 104).

The Swami used the term ‘Vedanta’ to hide all the methods of thoughts expounded by Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Chaitanya and other scholars. In other words, Vedanta includes the Advaita, Visishtadvaita and the dualist tradition of thought. But, he maintained that there was no incompatibility between the various line of ideas which developed by these scholars in their respective areas. According to him, the human mind begins with dualism, rises to qualified dualism and ultimately reaches the qualified monism or Advaita, which proclaims the highest truth – “Tat Twam Asi” (Gupta, 1963). Explain this he argued that man is not as he appears to be. He is neither the body, nor the mind and intellect. But he is the Soul or Atman, which cannot be pierced into or burnt by fire or made wet by water. In other words, it is birthless, deathless and changeless; it is infinite and eternal. In this respect it is a part of Parmaatman or Universal Soul.

Thus, from this conceptualization, one may outlined some of his basic ideas which was Vivekananda trying to explain. Such as firstly, man is not inherently a sinner as exposed by different literature based on bad understanding rather he is essentially pure and divine. Hence, the Swami urged the people to cast off this wrong notion and to believe in the divinity of man. Secondly, if one of us is divine and a part of Universal Soul, all of us become one. This also leads to the concepts of equality of man and the unity of mankind. Therefore, Vedanta preaches the messages of universal love and service. As love and service demand the spirit of sacrifice and renunciation, the message of Vedanta also insists upon it. As a strong believer in the philosophy of Vedanta, he found the real essence of India’s spirituality in the observation of love, service, sacrifice and renunciation.

He was, however, pragmatist enough to realize that the truths of Vedanta would have little appeal for a hungry man. He recalled the words of his Master that religion was not for empty stomachs. Spiritual message would melt in the air before the wrath of hunger, the penury and sad spectacle of the poor, demoralized and degenerated mass of people, devoured by senseless credulity and fetishism (Gupta, 1963: 83). Vivekananda in his kindness for the downtrodden held:

“ . . . but the crying evil in the East is not religion – they have religion enough but it is bread that suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throat. It is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics” (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 1964).

As Vivekananda says, in such conditions the very idea of freedom is essential for the intellectual as well as the practical necessity in India.

Vivekananda and Vision of Politics

Vivekananda was one of the greatest interpreters of the Vedantic epistemology, but he was never a political philosopher in the sense we regard Rousseau, Green or Bosanquet or he does not enter into analytical study of the methodology of political philosophy, nor does he probe into the dynamics of political processes and behavior. Even, he himself had cautioned his readers, “Let no political significance be ever attached falsely to any of my writings” (Rolland, 1960). To

the “Warrior Sannyasin” that he was conventional politics simply had no use. In particular he found the tweedle-dum tweedle-dee politics of the western variety to sterile, hollow and deceptive (Chakrabarti, 2007).

Thus, it would not be wrong to read these words on unambiguous articulation on positive self-esteem that was almost clearly absent in the ongoing political show-up in the colonial India. Not that Swami was seeking to banish all politics from life; rather he would uphold only that kind of politics which came as a service to humanity. Yet, “as a Sannyasin he would not personally get involved in anything connected with politics; for he knew he had a lofty mission to fulfill. But with his profound knowledge of history, sociology, philosophy and other sciences, he felt that his countrymen were ill prepared for that kind of politics which would bring them salvation” (Chakrabarti, 2007: 46).

Hence, Vivekananda’s most of the writings are largely on interpretation of ancient of ancient Vedantic religious scripture. Some other works like ‘Modern India’ and ‘East and West’ focuses on social and political issues. Apart from these his innumerable writings on issues like caste, state, society equality, freedom and as such also through light on his viewpoints. The most significant aspect of Swami’s ideas is that his philosophy of life combined religion, social reform and national reconstruction within a single structure of thought. Thus, we may summaries some of his ideas under following heads:

Vivekananda and His idea of Freedom

One of the important contributions of Vivekananda to political theory is his concept of freedom. He had a comprehensive theory of freedom. To him, freedom is an inalienable property of manhood; it is absolute, indivisible, comprehensive and all inclusive. He believed that the feeling of sameness towards all mankind leads to actual freedom, and feeling of superiority instead of leading towards freedom, is everywhere forging a fresh chain around ones feet. As a Vedantist, he considered omnipresent “Brahman” as the impulse behind the idea of freedom. This ‘Brahman’ in every man or woman as the human soul is sinless and ever free (Nandi, 2001: 45).

Thus, the bottom line of his development in these respect occurred with the interpretation of freedom not only as a spiritual state, but as the object of a continuing struggle. Freedom becomes a supreme value that was gradually fulfilled through an evolutionary process which rendered the attainment of freedom desirable at all levels of consciousness, political and social as well as moral and the spiritual. The dual nature of freedoms as understand by Vivekananda in terms of “external” and “internal” parts as identical with “political” and “spiritual” metaphors signifies the intellectual tradition of Hindu political epistemology (Chakraborty, 2014: 82).

He declared that liberty does not certainly mean the absence of obstacles in the path of misappropriation of wealth etc, by you and me, but it is our natural right to be allowed to use our own body, intelligence or wealth according to our wills without doing any harm to others, and all the members of society ought to have the same opportunity for obtaining well education or knowledge. According to him, freedom in its total aspects- physical freedom, mental freedom and spiritual freedom- had been the watchwords of the Upanishads.

Thus, Vivekananda considered freedom not only for maintaining religious harmony among various religious faiths and for realizing the spiritual life by the individuals but he also thought that the individual freedom was equally dispensable for the realization of his personality in the social and economic spheres. He, therefore, wanted to make freedom as the natural possession of individuals. He inspired that every individual must cultivate a free body mind and spirit. The strength and vitality of society depends on individual initiative and freedom.

Vivekananda and His Critique on Casteism:

Swami Vivekananda’s social and political ideas followed from his Vedantic conception of the inner-self as is omnipotent and supreme. He wanted to get rid of all evil ideas of caste superiority and tyranny which have made the Indian society loose, stratified and disintegrated. He mercilessly denounced the evils of untouchability and condemned all forms of inhuman practices prevalent in the traditional Indian society. But at the same time he realized that some form of caste system is inherent in every social organism that upheld the idea of division of labour. Caste in this sense was a natural outcome of social life. What he disapproved and condemned was casteism in the shape of subjugation, exploitation, denial of rights and the evil practice of untouchability (Roy, 2001). However, as a theoretician, Swami rationalized the four fold Varna divisions. According to him, the four fold differentiation of the social order represents the ideal type. The Brahman or the priest stands for the rule of knowledge and the advancement of science. The Kshatriya or the warriors stands for order. The Vaishya or the merchants represents commerce and help in the dissemination of knowledge through trade. The Sudra or the working section of the society represents the triumph of equality. He believes that if these four dominant principles could be synthesized that will be an ideal condition because the harmony of knowledge, protection, economic activities and equality is to be certainly desired. But this consummation is difficult of realization because every order seeks to concentrate power in its own hands and that leads to degeneration.

Vivekananda and His thought of Social Change

Vivekananda’s theory of social change was based on the Indian conception of history. It was a theory of political cycle that visualized periodic and cultural change in the regimes on the basis of law of change. He held that in every individual, there prevailed three qualities of knowledge, valour and ignorance and in every society and in every civilization, there

existed four classes of the people. All societies which had developed division of labour had four classes namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras (Mahapatra, 1998).

According to him in the first stage of human development, in almost all civilizations of the world, the power was in the hands of Brahmins. Though, this power was overthrown by the Kshatriyas who formed monarchical or oligarchic governments. But the power of this class was also replaced by the Vaishyas. And finally, according to him the power of the Vaishyas would be over thrown by the Sudras (Mahapatra, 1998). As per the law of nature wherever there was an awakening of new and stronger life, there it tried to conquer and take the place of the old and the decaying. Nature favoured the dying of the unfit and the survival of the fittest. The power of the Kshatriyas was brought down because of its despotic behaviour. He maintained that the real power of the society rested with the Sudras who produced wealth with the help of their labour power. The Sudras would become great not by acquiring the qualities of Brahmins, Kshatriyas or Vaishyas, but by retaining their own qualities as producers of wealth. Thus in the political theory of Vivekananda the awakening and freedom of India was synchronized with the rise of Sudras and workers and peasants to political power (Mahapatra, 1998.).

Vivekananda and His ideas on Socialism

It is argued that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Vivekananda become the trumpeters of socialist thoughts in modern India. While the first one frequently wrote on the issue of Samya in terms of synthesis of Hinduism with Socialism (Ganguly, 1975), the second one rejected 'those aspects of Hinduism which justified the inegalitarian aspect of the caste system' (Mehta, 1999: 167). Hence, the Swami 'defines socialism and individualism as the doctrine, which demands the sacrifice of individual freedom to social supremacy is called socialism while that which advocates the cause of individual is called individualism. In general perception, this is how Vivekananda has defined socialism' (Verma A. , 2015).

Indeed his conceptual framework Swami thus, qualitatively differs from the scientific ideas of socialism. Though, 'he cognizes history in its dialectical process and adheres to the fact that each evolutionary historical epoch ultimately culminates in a revolution yet his interpretation of history can, in no way, be equated to the theory of historical materialism propounded by Marx. It can rather be called spiritual materialism' (Verma A. , 2015).

Vivekananda's explanation of social change allow him to delineate the inexorable will finally developed a stage of Shudra rule. As he proclaim 'a time will come when there will be the rising of the Shudra class, with their Shudra-hood; that is to say, not like that as at present when the Shudras are becoming great by acquiring the characteristics qualities of the Vaishya or the Kshatriya, but a time will come when the Shudras of every country, with their inborn Shudra nature and habits – not becoming in essence Vaishya or Kshatriya, but remaining as Shudras – will gain absolute supremacy in every society' (Verma A. , 2015). As he believed this is the time when Socialism, Anarchism, Nihilism, and other like sects are the vanguard of the social revolution that is to follow (Dasgupta R. K., 1985). Thus, as a 'social realist' (Varma, 1961: 122) he at the same time advocated his notion of 'equal chance' for everyone. As he said in his deliberation:

"If there is inequality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all – or if greater for some and for some less – the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, Brahman is not so much in need of education as a Chandala. If the son of a Brahman need one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten. For, greater help must be given to him whom nature has not endowed with an acute intellect from birth. It is a madman who carries coal to Newcastle. The poor, the downtrodden, the ignorant, let these be your God" (Complete Works, Vol. VI, op. cit., 381).

Similarly, the Sannyasin did not share the opinion that religion is the opium for the people. According to him it is the prime necessity of life, the constitutional necessity of man, and religion in some cases is the main theme of a people's life as in the case of our own. In fact, "Vivekananda concept of revolution is an ideal concept but of global significance, because his prime mission was to build 'a city of Mankind'" (Verma A. 1961). Not only has he constructed city of Mankind but also the souls of its inhabitants (Rolland, 1960: 282 – 83). That is why a radical slogan handed down by him to the future generations, as he declared – 'Be man and help others to be man' 'Be divine and help others to be divine' (Dasgupta S. , 1991).

Vivekananda and His conception Nationalism

Thus, in a broad sense, Vivekananda has often been rightly called a great inspiration of the Indian nationalist movement, as well as of the leading political thinkers of twentieth – century India. His ideas unexceptionally played a vital role in strengthening the moral foundation of Indian nationalism to a significant extent. Though, he did not openly challenge the moral foundations of imperialist government but his life and personality busy with the reassertion of things Indian was indirectly the explicit symbolization of the neutralization of the foreign yoke (Varma, V. P, 1965). Still, the emerging objective conditions propitious for a nationalist awakening required a corresponding source of subjective sustenance and that was exactly what the country had the unique fortune to draw from the invigorating ideas of Vivekananda for their lay the most distinct visualization of what it meant for India to become a free nation or more correctly, what was needed for a society to be readied for the right kind of nationalism which would be most suited to its cultural heritage and growth potential (Chakraborti, 2007: 46). Indeed, the seed - sowing of nationalism in India is not in easy job. It called for a thorough transformation of the existing civic space crammed at that time with various sub-political vestiges. To arrive at

the desired level of efficiency in terms of political consciousness, the collective social entity must take a viable shape in emotional as well as intellectual sense. So long the people knew and loved their motherland, had vague perceptions of their heritage and got used to accommodating occasional alien intrusions. The resultant complacency and its concomitant, inward looking tendency left the civic space underdeveloped. This was anything but conducive to the growth of a true nationalist spirit particularly in a colonial set-up (Chakraborti, 2007: 46.). Perhaps, this is the reason why he said:

“My idea as to the keynote of our downfall is that we do not mix with other nations . . . we never had opportunity to compare notes. We were ‘kupamandukas’” (Complete Works, Vol. V : 220).

Nonetheless, Vivekananda gives a unique expression to the spirit of nationalism, which an eminent analyst of the Bengal renaissance (Podder, 1977) has categorized as ‘Nationalism in Religion’. The uniqueness lays not so much in the association of religion with the politics of nationalism as in the rediscovery of peoples most prized possession i.e., their historical identity which, in the case of India in Vivekananda’s view, could not be anything other than religion (Chakrabarti, 2007: 48).

Swami Vivekananda’s idea of nationalism thus, merged in deep religious sentiments and Vedantic considerations. He was the passionate advocator of the religious theory of nationalism because religion, he observed had to be made the backbone of the national life. Equally, spirituality according to Vivekananda, the realization of the eternal principles and was never to be identified with social dogmas, ecclesiastical formulations and absolute customs. Religion had been the persistent basis of Indian life and all reforms must come through religion and to be able to obtain the adherence of the masses (Chakraborty, 2014: 81-82).

Thus, If we revise his nationalist thoughts in a brief estimation we find it is based on four basic points; such as – firstly, the awakening of the masses who form the basis of the nation, secondly, development of the physical and moral strength, thirdly, unity based on common spiritual ideas and lastly, consciousness of and pride in the ancient glory and greatness of India (Majumdar, 1965). His speeches and writings in fact played a vital role in the development of nationalistic aspirations of Indians and established a sense of identity consciousness with the country. However, he did not openly advocate the cause of India’s political emancipation, mainly for two broad reasons. Firstly, he was a Sannyasin and did not want to get involved in political controversies. As he wrote:

“I am not politician or political agitator. I care only for the spirit . . . so you must warn the Calcutta people that no political significance be ever attached falsely to any of my writings or sayings . . . I have said a few harsh words in honest criticism of Christian governments in general, but that does not mean that I care for, or have any connection with politics” (The Life of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western Disciples, 1933).

Secondly, in those days the imperialist regime was so powerful and if he ‘would have openly advocated the cause of political autonomy he was sure to meet with imprisonment. That would have meant loss of his energy and detraction from the work that was dearest to his heart – the moral and religious regeneration of his countrymen’ (Verma, 1961: 118 – 119). That is why ‘instead to talking about political freedom . . . he talked about a more basic concept - strength . . . as a theorist and teacher Vivekananda has given to the country the ideal of fearlessness and strength’ (Verma, 1961: 118-120). At a time when the nation was seized with apathy, inertia and despair, he, thundered the gospel of strength and fearlessness. The Sannyasin urged his countrymen to be strong and strengthening their moral foundations. In fact this is clear cut political testament of Vivekananda to the Indian nation and her people.

It actually will not be possible to understand the genesis of the Indian nationalist movement and aspiration with the change in the tone of the political literature without having in our mind the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. His writings and speeches be intensified the developments of the native patriotism and battle against the colonial administration and government. The British government also admitted his influence; ‘the Sedition Committee Report of 1918 listed him among the individuals who instigated young men and women to wage war against the British Empire. Indeed, young revolutionaries, when apprehended by the police, were found to carry on their person, a pocket edition of the Gita and public address delivered by the Swami’ (Sen, 2011: 93).

Conclusion

Yet, this foregoing brief assessment of Vivekananda does not do full justice to the multi-layered character of his thoughts and perceptions. In fact “. . . the manner in which the thoughts, words and actions of Swami Vivekananda could be regarded as opening up a whole range of vistas regarding the construction of a civil society in a historically premature politico-cultural setting where tradition and orthodoxy, liberalism and license, rationality and laxity sit on each other in overlapping confusion. It is also important to see how the ideology of nationalism, clearly an alien concept, did not deteriorate into exclusionist dogma or an imitationist modernism. This was clearly a crucial challenge and there were really not many in this critical phase of contemporary Indian history who could with authority, sincerely and unqualified credibility address a problem of this dimension . . .” (Chakrabarti, 2007:58) as he did.

No doubt that the great Sannyasin re-modeled the Indian thought-world and worked for the moral and spiritual upliftment not only of the Indians but also of the humanity at large. Being a spiritual man to the core, he had nothing to do with politics as he himself has declared -

"I do not believe in any politics. God and truth are the only politics in the world, everything else is trash" (The Life of Swami Vivekananda: 454).

Nevertheless, his ideas came like a comet that gave impetus to the nationalistic movement in India. His sole object was to rouse the country, the sleeping tiger that has lost all faith in his power and makes no response. On investigating the cause of the social and political decline of the country, he found that Indians frittering away their energies in fighting over the trivialities had caused their downfall and the loss of individuality. That is why he 'was bent on transforming the very outlook of his countrymen whether it concerned religious practices or social moves or individual predilections' (Chakrabarti, 2007: 51). Thus, reaching in the conclusion of this piece the present writer honestly renouncing any kind of tendency of which level 'Swami as an ascetic or activist, reformer or conservative, patriot or prophet . . .' (Sen, 2011: 104) or anything else is may be a half attempt to portraying multi-pronged and stupendous endeavors of this Warrior Sannyasin.

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