

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF VIVEKANANDA: A SOCIALISTIC READING

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INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda was not only a visionary, or a monk but a nationalist and a reformer par excellence. He was a protagonist of Hindu social ideas and forerunner of socialism. He championed in his own time the causes of the down-trodden masses and the exploited poor class. He was much in advance of his age and prophesied the rule of the proletariat. The philosophical foundations of Vivekananda's political thought are innumerable. Major sources of the philosophy of Vivekananda are threefold.¹

1. Vedic and Vedantic traditions of Sankaracharya, Ramanuja, Madhava and Vallabha
2. Influence of Sri Ramakrishna.
3. His own life experiences.

He was never a political philosopher in the sense in which we regard Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau, T.H. Green as system builders in the field of political thought. He does not enter into the analytical study of the concepts of political philosophy. For getting an account of Vivekanand's philosophy one has to turn to his complete works. His political philosophy is contained mainly in his

- Lecture from Colombo to Almora
- The East and the West
- Modern India

But he has a place in the history of modern Indian political thought for two reasons²

I. The influence of Vivekananda over the Indian national movement.

Swami Vivekananda is widely considered to have inspired India's freedom movement. The revolutionary ideas he propounded had a tremendous influence on subsequent political thinking and action in India, especially on the mass dynamism of Mahatma Gandhi and the socialistic ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru. His sociological views played a positive role in the development of the patriotic and national self-consciousness of the youth of India. Vivekananda's clamant call to the Indian youth – "Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached" – is resounding all through India, rousing their social consciousness and kindling their damp spirits.

According to M.N. Roy, *"Vivekananda's nationalism was a spiritual imperialism. He called on Young India to believe in the spiritual mission of India his philosophy, on which was subsequently built the orthodox nationalism of the declassed young intellectuals, organized into secret societies advocating violence and terrorism for the overthrow of British rule. This romantic vision of conquering the world by spiritual superiority electrified the young intellectuals, whose desperate economic position made them restive"*³

With his own concept of Vedanta, Vivekananda gave the country the secularist ideal that now forms a part of the Constitution of modern India. It was he who first proclaimed on world platforms that all religions were but different paths that led to the same goal. His idea of secularism was, in fact, an advance of what is found in modern India. Even in 2011, during the anti-corruption Lokpal bill movement, the prominent figure Anna Hazare repeatedly mentioned that he was greatly inspired by Swami Vivekananda's thoughts.

II. Vivekananda was one of the first thinkers in India to offer a sociologically realistic interpretation of Indian history.

His sociological interpretation of Indian history is partly Marxist and partly comparable to the theory of Vilfredo Pareto. Comparable to Pareto regarding his notion of conflict among rival ruling classes or "Circulation of elites". According to Vivekananda there are two social trends in Indian history. One is the constant struggle for supremacy among the Brahmans and Kshatriyas with occasional interludes when these sections collaborated, and second, the unremitting exploitation of the masses through the ritualism of the priests and the sword of the Kshatriyas and later on of the Rajputs.⁴

ASA SOCIALIST

"I am a socialist, not because it is a perfect system, but because I believe that half a loaf is better than no bread."⁵

He can be considered as a Socialist in two senses: His vision about ancient Indian society as the domination of two upper castes and their political & economic exploitation over the poor sections. He championed the concept of equal chance for all the inhabitants of the country. He condemned the exclusion of the Shudras from the benefit of the vedic knowledge. Vivekananda denounced untouchability. He ridiculed the meaningless cult of the kitchen and the cooking-pot. Vivekananda's understanding of Vedanta made him a total opponent to the practice of untouchability. Denouncing, as he did, the practice of untouchability, Vivekananda anticipated, by several decades, the more effective campaign that Gandhi and Ambedkar carried on against this social evil.

Vivekananda's burning enthusiasam for the redemption of the oppressed is evident in these lines:

*"I do not care whether they are Hindus, or Mohammedans or Christians, but those love the Lord will always command my service. Plunge into the fire, my children.... Everything will come to you, if you only have faith.... Let each one of us pray day and night for the downtrodden millions in India, who are held fast by poverty, priest craft and tyranny- pray day and night for them.... I am no metaphysician, no philosopher, nay, no saint. I am poor. I love the poor.... who feels in India for the two hundred millions of men and women sunken for ever in poverty and ignorance? Where is the way out?..... Who will bring light to them? Let these people be your God.... Him I call a Mahatma(great soul) whose heart bleeds for the poor.... So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor, who having been educated at their expense, pays no the least heed to them....."*¹⁶

Removal of poverty, eradication of illiteracy, restoration of human dignity, freedom from fear,

availability of spiritual and secular knowledge to all, irrespective of their caste and class and the ending of all monopolies, religious, economic, intellectual, social and cultural – all these formed a part of what he derived from his practical Vedanta or Vedantic socialism.

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND KARL MARX

Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Marx (1818-1883) were two towering personalities of the 19th century, who redefined our outlook to human nature and society. These two great men in two different parts of the world, with their distinctive philosophies, were totally committed to the cause of the oppressed and were ready to sacrifice everything for that cause. Both were revolutionary thinkers who pioneered a radical change, in their own unique ways.

Vivekananda saw socialism as a ray of hope for the myriad of problems confronting India. He viewed the course of world history as a change in governance between the four castes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra in conformity to the law of nature. With the rise of Shudras, the lowest class, Vivekananda identified democracy and distribution of physical comforts and education. Swamiji's concept of socialism was in no way averse to religion. He believed in elevation of masses without injuring the religious sentiments and that social changes can be brought forward only on a firm platform of conduct character and spirituality.

Marx was an ardent socialist who believed in dialectical materialism wherein there is a dialectical manner of confronting, studying and understanding natural phenomena; and materialistic by its means of interpreting phenomena and drawing up its theory.

In the system of Marx economics, technology which represent the substructure are more important than the superstructure of politics. But Vivekananda not much emphasized the social and economic value of money. But after his return from the West he realized the value of social organization and used to say that if he collected three hundred million rupees, the salvation of Indian masses could be affected. He once wrote:

*"Material civilization, nay, even luxury, is necessary to create work for the poor, Bread! Bread! I do not believe in God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven! Pooh! India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of priest craft is to be removed. No priest craft, no social tyranny! more opportunity for everybody"*⁷

Vivekananda believed in the betterment & liberation of the individual first, before the society could be improved. He once declared "one single man contains within himself the whole universe"⁸.

Communism calls for collectivism, and it seems to stand against natural organic evolution of the individual. Marx stressed the need of an organized proletarian party for effectuating the coming socialist revolution. Vivekananda wanted to train individual workers for the social amelioration of India. He insistently repeated that India could be roused and rebuilt with the help of small groups of enthusiastic patriots, strong and courageous with "muscles of iron and nerves of steel and gigantic wills".

The fundamental difference between the vedantic socialism of Vivekananda and Marxism is that, the former stressed the reformation of society. Marx was a great realist and a dialectical materialist and wanted even violent social revolution. Although he was a man of religion and

meditation, Vivekananda was all for activity that would lead to increase in production and the removal of poverty. He always said with his Guru, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, that, "religion is not for empty stomachs." In Vivekananda's opinion, religion had to be the principal and leading force in implementing all social changes in India. Vivekananda's concept of socialism was in no way averse to religion. He believed in elevation of masses without injuring the religious sentiments and that social changes can be brought forward only on a firm platform of conduct character and spirituality.

Dialectical materialism is a scientific approach and is opposed to idealism which offers an interpretation based on religion. Marx believed in the power of economic forces rather than the ideological approach. For him, religion was the opium of the working class by the ruling class. Marxism sees in religion the exploitation of human ignorance and credulity.

Regarding nationalism Marx was an internationalist and never cared for the sentiments behind nationalism. The largest gap in his writings in politics was the limited attention given to the nation-state and nationalism. Marx believed that nations were a byproduct of the capital age because of the economic undercurrent bringing about markets for the good produced. Marx proclaimed that workingmen have no country and championed international co-operation of the working class. Vivekananda, on the contrary, was a nationalist to the core and believed in patriotism and national feeling. Vivekananda wanted each nation to grow to its full stature and strength, thus contributing to the sum total of world's growth and human welfare. Swamiji's nationalism had internationalism in essence and execution.

In Hinduism, the ultimate aim of human life is the attainment of salvation or Moksha. To attain Moksha, a conducive socio-economic order wherein an individual can lead a peaceful and undistracted life is imperative. Marxism also professes the attainment of a different order, that is, a classless society. A socialist state has no exploitation and the individual is freed from the burden of having to work for those who exploit his labour whereby leading to a classless society. Vivekananda and Marx viewed socialism through two different prisms with the ultimate goal of uplifting the downtrodden and the exploited class.

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1. Viswanath Prasad Varma, (1994), Modern Indian Political thought, Vol. II. Lakshmi Narain Agarwal.p.108
 2. Ibid.p.121-122
 3. M.N Roy, India in Transition, p.193 in N.1, p.107
 4. Vivekananda, Modern India, Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Almora, Advaita Ashram, Vol, IV p. 391
 5. Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.VI, p.381.
 6. The Life Swami Vivekananda, Chapter LXXXIII (Letter to his Indian disciples about 1894-95)
 7. Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.IV,p 313
 8. In autumn 1895, he wrote to Abhayananda: *Individuality is my motto, I have no ambition beyond training individuals*" (Quoted in R. Rolland, The Life of Vivekananda, P,790)