The Socio-Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

by
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P R E F A C E

The influence of Swami Vivekananda on the INDIAN Nationalist Movement is well-known. Swami Vivekananda was not only a visionary, or a monk but a nationalist and a reformer par excellence. Many in our own country think that religion and mysticism and social amelioration and political and economic reconstruction cannot unite and declare that the secular and spiritual ideals are polar opposites. Such a notion has been responsible for the gross misrepresentations of the spirit of Indian philosophy, religion and culture, but the mystics, the saints and the sages of India prove standing refutation of this gross misconception. India's foreign domination is also attributed to her religion which is considered to be dreamy, idealistic, fatalistic, world-denying, pessimistic and unethical and other – wordly. Swami Vivekananda's contribution to a faithful and sympathetic representation of India's aspirations and ideals in foreign lands cannot be gainsaid. Swami Vivekananda created not only a lofty Advaita Vedantic Ideal under a order new religious know as Ramkrishna Mission but founded a new epoch in the life of the Indian people also on social, economic, and political fronts in consistency with India's past heritage and in harmony with the Western ideals. Swami Vivekananda is that man who has understood the Ashwath tree" having its root (One) above and branches (manifold) below and (which is) avyaya (which will never perish) Srimand Bhagwat Geeta XV – I.

To my knowledge there has not been a single work so far exclusively on Swami Vivekananda's social and political philosophy. There is a vast kproportion of

unutilised materials with respect to his political and social views. He was a protagonist of Hindu Social ideas and a precursor 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 proletarist. It is necessary, therefore, that a thorough study of his social and political ideals be made particularly at a time when the younger generation feels attracted to the Western ideals without looking to its own treasures suitable to its own surroundings. The present work, therefore, is a systematic study of his social and political views in the light of modern Western doctrines, for only in this way can we adequately appreciate the treasures of India's constructive thinking on social and political ideals which are not so well-known. This work therefore, will prove a contribution to India's social and political thought at a time when much is talked in the world-councils about peace, equality, fraternity, co-operation etc. India may make some contributions to the mitigation of tension and unrest widespread in the world. Thus subject matter of the present thesis has been divided into eight chapters.

The First Chapter deals with the background of Indian Nationalism. In fact the impulse for the attainment of political freedom emanated from the religious foundations of Indian culture and civilizations. It was in point of fact a persistent endeavour on the part of national leaders at that time to defend and vindicate the ideas and ideals of India that prompted them to launch a struggle against the foreign rule. I have dealt with the circumstances of national awakening in this chapter.

In Chapter two an attempt has been made to connect social progress with religion. I have emphasised the point that it is utterly misleading to hold as Karl Marx and his followers hold that religion is a completely other-worldly affair. The long line of saints and sages in India bears witness to the fact as to how religion has been the main principle of social change. No one can dispute the fact that all religious movements and reforms have brought about significant changes at the different period of India's cultural history. I have pointed out in this Chapter as how Advaita is not merely a metaphysic but also a social philosophy.

Chapter three focus on the metaphysical background of the Indian social and political ideology. It is definitely a certain metaphysical outlook of the Indian people as a whole that permeates through all the spheres of secular interest. There can be no dividing line between man's metaphysical outlook and the way he conducts himself in the world I have pointed out how the basic principles of Indian social thought rooted firmly in metaphysical outlook that can cure the maladies of the present day world. Swami Vivekananda called us to these principles.

The relations between individual and society have been elaborated in the elaborated in the fourth Chapter. Difference between the Western and the Indian standpoints concerts the emphasis, the East or the West lays upon this or that side of the complex problem. It may readily be admitted that society has no personality of its own and that it is the individual who builds up society. The discipline and the training of the inner world of man is the object of religion. The errors of the Western points of view

having its starting points in man's social conditions have been clearly pointed cut in this Chapter. The limitations of the views of Darwin, Freud and Marx have been unfolded and the stress has been laid on the necessity of starting with man.

In Chapter Five I have concentrated on a General review of the socio-political philosophy of Swami Vivekananda in the framework of his Advaita Vedanta. There can be no doubt that it is Swami Vivekananda who, more than any other thinker of contemporary India, has pointed our that how Advaita Vedanta entails social and political ideals which he preached and propagated.

The Sixth Chapter ideals with the social and political order as envisaged in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda was a democrat par excellence. Advaita philosophy supports democratic way of life. I have pointed out how Swami Vivekananda was one of the most ardent Champions of the democratic values which follows from his Advaitic outlook.

The Seventy Chapter throws light on the social ideas of Swami Vivekananda. His ideas of Caste and class, the occupational basis of the divisions of early society into Varnas have been set forth in this Chapter. I have also discussed his doctrine of man making education which is certainly a corrective to many of the misconceptions and errors affecting modern education. It has been pointed out how all the evils of the present day can be traced back to the kind of education that is imparted from the primary to the university levels in Schools of colleges. Further in this Chapter

itself I have attempted a show that for him there is no distinction between man and women, so far as the spirit is concerned.

Swami Vivekananda's political ideals and ideas have extensively discussed in the eighth chapter. The relation between the State and people, the purpose for which the State exists and the duties and obligation of the people to the State have been dealt with in this Chapter. I have explained how these political views and ideals to which he gave an effective utterance in all his speeches, follow from his own Advaita philosophy which is certainly not a reproduction of Shankara's Advaita, but one reinterpreted by him and adopted to modern conditions.

This humble work of mine owes much to the inspiration and encouragement of my loving father Sri Shyama Mohan Prasad to whom I find myself unable to express my feelings in words. The present study would not have been completed without the valuable suggestions and blessings which were very frequently showered on me by Dr. R.S. Srivastava University professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy, Ranchi University. It is needless to say that the pain-staking guidance and keen interest of Dr. P. P. Vdiyarthi, Professor of Philosophy, Ranchi University, went a long way in completing my studies. I express my heart-felt gratitude and reverence to both the erudite professors of Ranchi University. To my Principal Mr. J. D. Kishore of Jamshepdur Workers' College I an very thinking who had been liberal in grating me leave for completing my project. I am also thankful to my colleagues and relations for their constant hammering and the good-wishes for accomplishment of this

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THE BACKGROUND OF INDIAN RENNAISANCE

Contacts Between East and West : The Consequent Diamorphism:

If we unroll the scrolls of history we find that there had been contacts between the East and the West in more ancient times. Even before the birth of Jesus Christ people from different parts of the world gathered together in Alexandria and Egypt for commerce and trade and in which Indians also participated. "Her (India's) ships crossed the oceans and her wealth brimmed over to Judea, Egypt and Rome"[1] We read in Old Testament of the Holy Bible that one of the sons of Adam had wandered even to India.[2]   The Orphic cult shows definite Oriental influence. It is said that the Orphics were vegetarians and did not take onion. Plate displayed Indian influence and the Stoic Zone was most probably an Asian. Between the doctrines of Pythagoras and Advaita Vedanta of Upinisads there are striking similarities. The famous Orientalist William Jones held that "it is impossible tpo read the Vedanta or many other fine compositions in illustration of it, without believing that Pythagoras and Plato derived their sublime theories from the same fountain with the sages of India"[3]. It is neither possible nor desirable to comment on the doctrinal identity between the Greeks and the Indians. But it is now accepted on all hands that Alexandria was the central place famous for cultural contact between India and the West. Plotinus, the Roman Philosopher was considerably influenced by the doctrines of Upnisads and learnt probably under the feet of an Indian master. It is thus seen that India had already made her access into the different parts of the world. But it must be remembered that her

conquest, through out her history, had been dominantly cultural and not political. The historical accounts left by Megasthenes, Herodotus and others amply justify that "The dawn of Aryan civilization broke for the first time on the horizon, not of Greece or Rome, not of Arabia or Persia, but of India, which may be called the motherland of metaphysics, philosophy, logic astronomy, science, art, music, and medicine, as well as of truly ethical religion"[4].

Travelers in the ancient and medieval periods reported to the West about the treasures of Indian spiritualism and as a consequence there germinated in the minds of Western people the hunger and curiosity for the knowledge of the cultural tradition of India. The visits of the travelers were quite naturally followed by the invasions of the militant emperors of the West. First came the Muslims who robbed India materially and succeeded in enslaving Indian people politically. Then came the Europeans who systematically usurped, not only the political freedom, but also the social freedom. As a price for this freedom they gave commercialism and extreme selfishness, so as to wipe out morality and spirituality completely for all times to come. The reins of the government gradually passed into the hands or Britishers. The British rulers of India were aided by the Christian missionaries who, in their attempts to prove the supremacy of the Holy Bible, were bent upon vilifying, ataining and distorting the Indian scriptures. St. Xavier of the 16th century A.D. used to vilify the Hindu deities in order to convince the new converts to Christianity that his religion was the crown and completion of all the world religions. Bishop Heber in one of his poems refers to Hindus when he says:

"The heathen in his blindness

Bows down to wood and stone".[5]

Swami Vivekananda also felt that "the English used three "B" s-Bible, brandy and bayonets in civilising India".[6] Thus was generated a feeling of inferiority complex among the Indian People in general.

The French philosopher Bergson has referred to what he calls "Diamorphism" which is a sort of mental disease to which both the rulers and the ruled fall victims. In his words "The truth is that diamorphism generally makes each of us both a leader with an instinct to command and a subject ready to obey, although the second tendency predominates to the extent of being the only one apparent in most men".[7] This is true, to a very great extent, of the Indian people and their foreign rulers for a very long period of time. India has been ruled by the British for several hundreds of years and during this long period it is no wonder that the evil effects of a foreign rule should have exerted pernicious influence on the thought and character of the people at large. It is said, as it follows from diamorphism, that the ruled people do not think. They cannot contribute to the world in any sphere through what they can think to be their own. Naturally, those who rule think that there is ample justification why they should rule those who are ruled by them. And on the other hand the ruled people think that since they do not have necessary inherent strength and power for their existence and survival they are inferior in every respect to those by whom they are ruled. Thus are engendered in both the parties what the psychologists call the opposite feelings of superiority complex and inferiority complex.

Distortion of Indian Ideas and Ideals – A death-Sleen of Indian Nation:

For several decades the history of the British rule in India has been a history of distortion, destruction and gross misrepresentation of the ideas and ideals of Indian thought and culture. It may be recalled at this stage that for the Western thinkers no consideration was paid to man's ethical perfection in Indian scriptures. Several books were written by the scholars of Christian missionaries whose one single purpose was to misinterpret Indian thought and culture and thereby to establish the superiority of Western traditions rooted in Christian culture. India's political decline was attributed to her religion. The books which were the basic sources of Indian religion were regarded as the works of barbarians. For the Christian writers "The other systems came to be regarded as a preparation, and Christianity as the crown and completion, of them all".[8] Indian religions were branded as pessimistic and other-worldly and it was thought that for the HIndus the world was delusion and a snare and therefore there was no justification for improving it. Escape from worldly obligations and redemption as a flight from the world and freedom from the possibility of being born again were, according to those Christian missioneries, the dominant religious ideals of the Indian people. In the words of Schweitzer; "Many passages of the Upnisads indeed give this impression. But the real relief of the Brahmins is that man does not attain to union with the Brahman by means of any achievement of his natural power of gaining knowledge, but solely by quitting the world of the senses in a state of ecstasy and thus learning the reality of pure being".[9] Further the Law of Karma was treated as fatalistic in character and there was

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not the least chance of improvement in character and the surroundings of the individuals, since everything was fore-ordained. According to Sydney Cave, a Christian theologian, the Law of Karma or "The belief in cyclic recompense provides no consolation to the suffering individual. The Brahman may be pleased to regard his advantage of caste and opportunity as due reward for his merit in a previous birth....".10 Therefore, there could be no question of any social, ethical and political norm in Indian life. These Christian missionaries did a great deal to misguide the Indian people by declaring that their goods were immoral, that the ethical virtues did not find an important place in Indian scriptures. "Thus in India ethics has always been less esteemed than metaphysics, and the highest good has been conceived, not as a moral quality, but as absorption into the infinite". The language in which the nature of God was defined and explained in HIndu scriptures was that of ethical indifference. God was above virtue and vice and hence a-moral. The doctrine, that the ideal man was one who had not the least regard for ethical distinction, was strenuously propagated and popularised. If everthing has been settled once for all by what one has already laid in store by virtue of one's Karmas, good or bad, performed by him in his previous order of existence, where in lay any justification for social service and efforts for the eradication of poverty, disease, illiteracy famine and so on? If the poor grovel in abject poverty and if there are people diseased and disabled, this is because of their own deeds, which can be exhausted only by reaping their corresponding consequences. Remedial measures would be ineffectual as it was laid down that a Karma, whose consequence has not been reaped, cannot perish even in millions of lives. If so, the conditions of all men are what they themselves have caused to fall upon them and individual efforts would be of

no avail in minimising their catastrophic effects. Therefore, there could be no incentive for social norms and thus no stimulus was left for the removal of social evil. Humanitarianism, social uplift, social service, dignity of man, love of freedom were, therefore, the ideals imported from the West and there were no grounds, philosophical or cultural, for them in Indian religious heritage where the soul of man is inherently inactive and would achieve perfection and the fulfillment of its destiny by slipping into a state of absolute quietude. There could be no philosophical justification for the ideals of vigour and health and for taking interest in the zest and pleasures of life.

Thus was the life, thought and culture of the Indian people subjected to severe criticism by Christian missionaries and even the basic Hindu scriptures like Upnisads, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana,. India's art, philosophy, religion, sculpture indeed everything in which India's greatness is compelling, was misrepresented and it was thought that such distortions were the last words about the worth of Indian civilization. It was doubted whether India had a civilization for about two centuries, for, everything that was noble, great and sublime in Indian thought and culture, which has a history more ancient than any other culture and civilization of the world, was condemned and denounced and misinterpreted in order to establish the superiority of, and therefore, to instil in the minds of Indian people the basic ideas of Western culture. The noted historian of Western philosophy, Frank Thilly held that "Even the theories of Oriental peoples, the Hindus, Egyptians, and Chinese, consist in the main of mythological and ethical doctrines and are not complete systems of thought. They are pervaded with poetry and faith".12 The suppression of the perennial streams of Indian

culture and civilization proved to be the most effective means of blinding Indian people to their own past heritage and thereby of preventing them, for good, the appreciative awareness of their national glory and dignity. To say that the foreign rule could not bring in its trail some of the most powerful influences moulding the Indian outlook would be too presumptious. But the fact remains that the evils far outweighed and outnumbered the advantages and what greater evil can therebe than the deep slumber that is no better than death itself? It was doubtful if there existed any such thing as Indian Nation, for, it appeared that the time was not ripe for the Indian people to be called a nation, as it was yet to be seen whether they fulfilled the minimum requirements in the different spheres for being styled as a nation. What, after all, are the chief characteriastics by which we are able to declare in respect of people belonging to a certain geographical area that they constitute a nation?

It must be admitted that a nation is formed chiefly by the sense of belonging to a system of beliefs, ideas and ideals. Sorley once remarked : "Neither biography nor history is intelligible without reference to values the national life shows unity and purpose not so much by wealth or power being possessed by the people or equally distributed among them, as by a community of interest such that the same values appeal to all"13. In this sense there was no such thing as Indian Nation. It could not be urged that there was a body or a system of common beliefs regarding human conduct and thought and, therefore, in such perilous times to think of Indian nationalism was no better than to dream an insubstantial empty dream.

Like a death-blow came the momentous resolution of Lrd William Bentinck recorded in the Minutes of 1835 : ".... that the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed in English education alone".14 As a follow up action Lord Macaulay promulgated his system of English education which yielded fruitful results in straying Indian minds away from their past heritage and concentrating them on the blessings of English education which alone was considered to be the perennial source, an indexaustible treasure of highest wisdom. The fundamental norms of Indian thoughts and conduct were thus thoroughly westernised. Education, administration law and justice, the economic system, industry, politics, religion and culture, that is, every sphere of Indian life underwent radical change and on each of them was impressed the stamp of western civilisation and culture. Going overseas and obtaining a foreign degree began to be reckoned as the highest achievement for an Indian. We may say that this slavish mentality has not even now been completely stamped out. But it cannot be denied that in those days one could not be allowed to think that anything important and useful could be found in anything Indian. In the words of D.S. Sharma: "The inrush of a totally different civilization put an end to all creative work for a time and an uncritical admiration for all things western took possession of the mind of the educated class coupled with a contempt for things of native origin".[15] This was the death-sleep of Indian Nation and even Indians belonging to the higher castes paid no heed to the study of their scriptures. It is against such a background that we have to assess the contributions of Swami Vivekanands.

The Role of Socio-religious Movements in the Nineteenth Century:

In the early Nineteenth century thinking minds became critical of the evils of the evils of foreign domination and they put forth their energies for a concerted action for the achievement of India's freedom. Characteristic of the genius of India, the leaders who organised the movement against British rule were all religious minded, because political freedom and spiritual freedom are inextricably bound up. From time immemorial India has been a religious country and the highest tributes have been paid, not so much to political leaders as to the religious leaders who have tried, from time to time, to bring about necessary reforms on different fronts in our national life. Mrs. Annie Besant, the famous theosophist, held that the Indian masses, in their heart of hearts, are religious and " It only throbs with full response when the religious note has been struck which call out its sympathetic vibration."[16] Thus came into existence such significant sociopolitical, cultural and religious organisations as the Brahmosamaj headed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pratthana Samaja under the leadership of Mahadeo Govinda Rana de and Arya Samaja founded by Dayananda Saraswati. Since Ramkrishna Vivekananda movement was preceded by these socio-religious movements, it is necessary to discuss these at some length which have left their marks on this great movement.

The pioneer of socio-political and religious movements in India was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) of Bengal in North Eastern India who founded the Brahmo Samaja society which aimed at reforms in diverse fields like education, religion and social

customs etc. In order to wake the Hindu society from the slumber of superstitions and dogmas he felt it necessary that scientific education on Western lines, as distinguished from the traditional pathsala lines pescribed by the priests, be limparted to the Indians. To this effect the Raja wrote a letter to Lord Amherst. This Raja's appeal did not go unheeded. Lord Macaulay just after the death of the Raja, convinced the then Governor-General to pass a resolution in 1835 favouring English education. In the sphere of religion " Ram Mohan Roy was a zealous Hindu, proud of India's past, proud of the achievements of his race and eager to conserve all that was good and great in lhis ancestoral religion.[17] " Ram Mohan Roy was opposed to polytheism and idolatry into which Hindusism or Brahmanism degenerated, but adhered to the monotheistic and monistic spirit reflected in the Upnisads and Brahma–Sutras. The reforms which Ram Mohan Roy brought about in the Hindu Society turned him into an immortal figure in the annals of Indian history. It was Ram Mohan Roy who took the lead in the year 1818 in creating a public opinion against the most cruel and gruesome practice of self-immolation by the widows, popularly known as the practice of Sati. His vigorous propaganda against this practice ultimately resulted in the abolition of the practice of Sati by an act of legislation initiated by Lord William Bentinck in the year 1829. Further, Ram Mohan Roy vehemently opposed polygamy, infanticide and caste system which were the abuses of Hindu society. One of the admirers of the Raja remarks :"   It is more than fifty years, that there arose a genius like a solitary star in a night of darkness who in spite of great opposition and persecution gave the death-blow to idolatry and superstition which had degnerated the Hindu nation.......Ram Mohan was one of those men who made their appearances from time to time in the world to be the enlighteners

of nations and to protect men from forsaking truth".[18] Under the leadership of such a personality Brahmo Samaja made successful attempts at liberating the Indian minds from the fetters of dogmas and superstitions prevalent in the name of religion.

The call given in the North-East of India by this "Prophet of coming Humanity" (as Dr. Brajendra Nath seal used to call Raja Ram Mohan Roy) was so thunderous that it was bound to echo; and the echo came from the South-West of India, that is, Maharashtra, where, under the leadership of Mahadeva Govinda Ranade a Prarthana Samaja was established with the following four objects.

" I.   the disapproval of caste;

   II.   the introduction of widow remarriage;

   III.the encouragement of Women's education; and

IV.   the abolition of child marriage"[19]

So far it was purely a social movement. But when the leadership passed on to an able guide like Ranade, its objectives were widened and diversified and religious reforms were also included in its programme. Mahadeva Govinda Ranade realised quite early that one of the causes of the failures of Brahmo Samaja movement was that, although in letter Brahmo Samaja was opposed to the Semitic religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism, in spirit it adopted the extreme monotheism of these religions which could not be assimilated by the Indian masses. The adherents of Parthana Samaja had thus