

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF VIVEKANANDA'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL THOUGHT: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Vivekananda showed the hollowness of such a materialistic philosophy of mind, matter and universe. Any polity resting on such a superficial conception of man and universe, he saw, was bound to crumble down. Therefore, he developed a philosophy of life which must pulsate every aspect of a system of political thought if it was to survive for long and if it was to exist for the maximum welfare of mankind. Vivekananda with a view to finding out any possible social and political system in his thought. The common belief hitherto was that he was a Vedantist and preached only Vedantic philosophy for the general welfare of mankind. Thus, Vivekananda preached that knowledge was not ultimate Reality, as conceived by the West, but only action.

Keywords: Polity resting, pulsate, political thought, maximum welfare

This paper seeks to provide a contextual study of Indian political thought which was not exactly derivative of western sources. We can broadly divide modern Indian thought into two phases. The first phase was that of what has often been referred to as the phase of 'Social Reform'. Thinkers of this phase were more concerned with the internal regeneration of Indian society it was often referred to as the Indian renaissance. The second phase is the phase of Indian nationalism. Vivekananda with a view to finding out any possible social and political system in his thought. The common belief hitherto was that he was a Vedantist and preached only Vedantic philosophy for the general welfare of mankind. For reasons of this belief he was not taken seriously either by sociologists or by political scientists of India and of abroad. While there was little doubt in the fact of his being a true devotee of Vedanta, the present writer felt that scattered in his thoughts were vital elements which went to build a system of social and political thought. The assumption of the present writer was that his ideas had great social and political relevance and that, if carefully studied, one would detect a closely-knit system of political thought, which was both of theoretical and practical value for Indian and foreign scholars of political science. He did not propound any abstract political beliefs, ideas or theories, as he was not a theoretician. His attention was mainly concentrated on the amelioration of the down-trodden masses, on their upliftment and general happiness. Therefore, he was seedling to awaken the masses in the East and the elites in the West. To one he was preaching the gospel of nationalism, and to the other warning of the insurmountable dangers of advanced technology and science. To the East he was advocating the reconstruction of the social system and polity on positive lines and to the West he was pointing out the hollowness of their modern Parliaments, Democracies, concepts of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. He was seeking to peep into the future course of events and forewarning the shape of social and political system to

come. He was thus a Messiah to the poor and down-trodden and a futurist to the advanced civilizations of the world. He combined in himself the speculative vision and wisdom of the East with the theory of action practiced in the West. He was taking an integral and synthetic view of life and society and wanted all systems of thought, whether social or political, to be adapted accordingly.

This work, then, was aimed at testing this assumption of the present writer that Vivekananda unconsciously developed a system of social and political thought, unknown to both East and West, a unique system in itself, with both theoretical and practical wisdom, which was a historical necessity of the present times". To achieve this' aim, the present writer not only emerged deeper into the vast ocean of Vivekananda's ideas and thought but also examined the classical and modern theories in the realm of political thought. Such an examination was considered necessary to see if Vivekananda really developed a novel system of political thought as assumed by the present writer. All this examination has been put into this work in about nine chapters. The first chapter deals with the foundations of his thought, the next three with his social ideas and the remaining five with his political ideas. The conclusions that emerged from such an examination may be presented as below. The foundations of Vivekananda's political thought lay primarily in Vedanta.

But Vivekananda was not simply restating or re-interpreting Vedanta. He studied all the sacred scriptures of India. He got himself acquainted with the wisdom contained in Sankara's system of knowledge, in Upanisada, Gita, in Buddha and others. Endowed with a logical and rational way of looking at the world, he developed an outlook for world society which combined the best in all systems of thought. He asked people to follow Sankara although he differed from his school of thought in many essential aspects. He accepted the Sankhya cosmology as modified by Advaita Vedanta, as he believed that the involution of the Vasana or will must be preceded by the involution of Mahat or cosmic consciousness, but not blindly and entirely. He picked up all that was best in Buddha particularly the notion of caste. He found Upanisada and Gita as true scriptures. His vedantic view of life combined both Sankara's metaphysics and Buddha's ethics and thus what he propounded was a positive and affirmative philosophy of life.

Vivekananda showed the hollowness of such a materialistic philosophy of mind, matter and universe. Any polity resting on such a superficial conception of man and universe, he saw, was bound to crumble down. Therefore, he developed a philosophy of life which must pulsate every aspect of a system of political thought if it was to survive for long and if it was to exist for the maximum welfare of mankind. Thus, Vivekananda preached that knowledge was not ultimate Reality, as conceived by the West, but only action. Knowledge was empirical and hence implies action. But action alone was not enough for developing any system of social and political thought. Action was to be combined with contemplation and meditation. What the modern world needed today was a synthesis of contemplation and action vision and action. In other words, individual salvation was to be combined with social service. That should form the basis of any ideal state. It was in a way the spiritual realization of mind, matter and universe. The, spirit should not be the means but the end in itself. Such a love implied the absence of jealousy and the acceptance of repentance. It was, thus, the principle of acceptance that Vivekananda preached. Evidently, such a practical philosophy of political thought was both positive and dynamic.

According to Vivekananda, the basic unit of Universe or Society or State was Man, which was the miniature microcosm of the macrocosm.... the Universe. Man was more than an intellectual being.... endowed with depths and heights which could not be encompassed in a purely materialistic or positivistic philosophy. There were no compartments in human personality. There were no compartments in human personality leading to mutual exclusion and hostility in human aspirations and values. Again, man was more than body. He was a moral self. This moral self sprang from his spiritual self. Thus man was essentially divine.

In this light Vivekananda examined the relation between mind and world. There was no duality between the two as envisaged by western scholars, who interpreted both in the material sense. Vivekananda explained the world in terms of the, mind, Prana (Force) was action in the Universe. Akasha (Matter) was passive. Prana could not act without Akasha. Thus force and matter would be considered as separate and divorced from each other. Nature included both mind and thought. All knowledge was reflected to consciousness. Individual was not conscious of everything. In fact, the mind of the individual worked on two planes — the conscious and the unconscious. However, it was limited by Reason. But Reason also could not go beyond the limits of consciousness.

Again, Vivekananda expressed the view that society was not a political organization, not an economic unit, nor a prudential concern at all, but a perfect system, fully organic whole, a loving and a living union, having its basis in religion. Whose purpose was spiritual development and whose instruments were spiritual injunctions. Society was only a reflex, the various vocational groups being its different limbs. The ideal form of society embodied the highest truth, held practised and lived by all. Wordly prosperity was to be pursued within the framework of four values of dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Vivekananda sought to integrate both the spiritualistic and materialistic; idealistic and realistic; individualistic and socialistic interpretations of man and society. There was no anti-thesis between the two; both were complimentary to each other. There was a continuum between society, culture and civilization. Politics and social improvement were the goals of mankind in the West. God and Religion were seen as helpers in this goal. Thus religion was subordinated to the secular needs of man in the West. But Vivekananda considered Religion as the fountainhead of social stability and spirituality.

Vivekananda further posited that evolution was organic in nature. The evolutionary process was reflected in the evolution of matter and in the manifestation of the: Spirit. Again creation was without beginning or end. It developed from the potential to the "actual state. However three distinct phases of existence could be seen; origination, continuation and destruction. The same was true of the Universe as a whole. It was also true of the evolution of the State. Vivekananda's theory of organic evolution of man, society and State was connected with his theory of cyclic change. His theory of cycle change revolved around the ideas of rest, change and homogeneity; love and hate; spirituality and materiality. The spiritual aspect of history was timeless. Its temporal side was the material manifestation. The infinite flight of history was symbolically represented in the cyclic form. The timeless march of history was a voyage of the spirit seeking the freedom of the individual from the shackles of time, from Maya altogether. History was a transcendental-

process. Behind the so-called appear once and reappearance, progression and regression, there was the eternal process.

In this context, Vivekananda put forward his concept of renunciation and service. This concept laid emphasis upon the if principle that 'man must know to live and not merely live to know. This implied an equilibrium between the forces of reason and faith. Renunciation and service were just like the convex and concave surfaces of the same coin. Here Vivekananda disagreed with Kant and Mill who advocated the Furthermore, a State by its very nature was neither a class institution nor an association. The character of a State was determined by its purposes and these purposes hinged round the well-being of the individuals and society. These purposes were not utilitarian in character. These purposes corresponded to the three elements of human nature described above. Man's essential purpose was the attainment of happiness which consisted in the proper balance of these elements. The Western nations failed to solve the perennial problem of human alienation, which existed even in the best of the modern European States, because they failed to realize the wholesome character of human happiness. He thus criticized the Benthamite principle of "greatest happiness of the greatest number."

A just social order, thus viewed, was one in which the individual got full opportunities for the development of his individuality. This implied both material and spiritual freedom for the individual. Nature did not impose a rule from outside. All liberty, individual, national, religious, social and ethical, was based upon this fundamental principle of existence. Therefore, it was incumbent upon the individual to perfect his individuality by unhindered development from within, and to respect and to help and be helped by the same free development in others. His concept of freedom was also interlinked with the concept of equality, as freedom was a condition of equality vice versa. Such a view stood in contrast to those of Tocqueville and Lord Acton who considered freedom and equality as incompatible. For Vivekananda, there was no conflict between the two; they were rather complementary. Freedom was of no consequence unless it was based on the solid rock of equality. Therefore, he advocated that every individual should have the same rights and privileges in society. However, absolute equality and absolute freedom were impossible.

Vivekananda also linked his concept of 'nationalism' with that of 'internationalism' and universal brotherhood. He realized that the contemporary concept of nationalism with concomitant growth of aggressiveness, industrialism and sovereignty of nations actually led to parochialism, racism, communalism, militarism and the like monsters which imperiled human freedom and liberty. Vivekananda's concept of universal brotherhood, based on a universal religion, on the attainment of self-realization, on infinite universal individuality, if realized and accepted, would lead to the development of humanitarianism and organizations based on spirituality. Such spiritual internationalism of Vivekananda was nothing but an expression of spiritual unity of man. Vivekananda derived the purely materialistic outlook on internationalism. He accepted the due place of materialism-in the evolution and progress of human society.

Vivekananda, acquainted by Indian conditions, laid the foundations of a new brand of socialism. He defined socialism as that doctrine which demanded the sacrifice of individual freedom to social supremacy. He believed that true socialism in India could be based on the solid foundations of the common people - the masses. He decried the exploitation of the lower classes by the upper classes. Unlike western

socialists he neither believed in the elimination of private enterprise, nor in the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production to prevent exploitation of the poor by the rich in the society. Unlike communists and the Syndicalists, he did not believe in using violent and revolutionary methods for the quick overthrow of the existing capitalist system.

Vivekananda saw the process of social growth and development in India and envisioned that a Sudra Raj was destined to come in India in the years and centuries ahead. Elaborating his concept of socialism a little further. Vivekananda stressed the belief; Sitalpru socialism should be based on a social order in which diversity of capacity and occupation were allowed to exist, but in which privilege was totally abolished. Such a socialism should be ushered through culture and mutual esteem. The motto should be "From caste to socialism through culture." Socialism should not be divorced from culture but based on cultural equality. True socialism should be brought about through a process of progressive evolution in his social and economic inequalities got reduced gradually.

Conclusion

To sum up Vivekananda accepted the organic analogy of society but his organic conception of society did not limit only to each other organ functioning in relation to the other in order to maintain the social existence. In fact, such an organic conception of society was adopted in the West to enjoin upon individuals to be socially responsible to the State. But Vivekananda exposed the hollowness of such a view and put forward a new interpretation in the light of traditional Indian thought. When Plato treated individual as a part of an organic order, as a functioning unit of the State, he, in fact, was propounding a negative conception of human psychology. He, thereby, ignored the true relationship between individual and society. Also, he, emphasized only one aspect of individual's mind which was allowed to form at the cost of other aspects.

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