

Vivekananda to political theory is his concept of freedom: A political analysis

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Abstract

Vivekananda's concept of freedom, appears to be quite transcendental. He points out that the whole universe is in constant motion towards freedom. In freedom it rises, in freedom it rests. He not only advocates spiritual freedom or emancipation from the bonds of Maya but also stands for the freedom in its totality - physical, mental and spiritual. To Vivekananda, the material world means laws; and laws mean slavery from whose clutches it is impossible to escape. From this dictum Vivekananda came to the conclusion that the body, the material being, is subordinated to the laws of nature and that the soul, the spiritual being, is caged in the body.

Keywords: Freedom, physical, mental, nature, spiritual, means laws.

Vivekananda individual and society formed the warp and woof of the same fabric. The economic, social and political developments were linked together. Individual and family, family and nation, nation and humanity, all human groupings from the lowest to the highest formed only different steps of the same spiral process. Vivekananda was the passionate advocate of the religious theory of nationalism because religion, he stated, had to be made the backbone of the national life. He felt that the future greatness of the nation could be built only on the foundations of its past greatness.¹ To be unmindful of the past was tantamount to the negation of the very being of the nation. It meant almost the repudiation of its existence. Hence, Indian nationalism had to be built on the stable foundation of the past historical heritage. In the past, the creativity of India expressed itself mainly and dominantly in the sphere of religion. Religion in India had been a creative force of integration and stability and if and when the political authority had become loose and weak, it imparted even to that a force of rehabilitation.

Hence, Vivekananda declared that the national life should be organized on the basis of the religious ideal. Spirituality or religion meant, according to him, the realization of the eternal principles and was never to be identified with social dogmas, ecclesiastical formulations and obsolete customs. Religion had been the persistent basis of Indian life and all reforms must come through religion to be able to obtain the adherence of the masses.²

Thus a spiritual or religious theory of nationalism may be regarded as the first contribution of Vivekananda to political theory.³ Vivekananda's soul, like that of Bankim, was lit with the luminous vision of Mother India as a deity and this conception of India as the visible expression of the divine mother has been the basic concept in the writings of the early Bengal nationalist. A second contribution of Vivekananda to political theory is his concept of freedom. He had a comprehensive theory of freedom. The whole universe, he said, in its constant motion represented the dominant quest for freedom. He regarded the right of liberty as the only condition of growth. He said : "To advance towards freedom— physical, mental and spiritual, and help others to do so is the supreme prize of man. Those social rules which stand in the way of the unfoldment of this freedom are injurious,

and steps should be taken to destroy them speedily. Those institutions should be encouraged by which men advance in the path of freedom..." He not only stood for spiritual freedom from the bonds and demands of Maya, but also wanted the material or external freedom of man. He believed in the theory of natural rights of man. He stated ; "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 will, without doing any harm to others; and all the members of a society ought to have the same opportunity for obtaining wealth, education, or knowledge," Freedom in its total aspects-physical freedom, mental freedom and spiritual freedom-had been the watchwords of the Upanishads.⁴

Vivekananda's concept of freedom, appears to be quite transcendental. He points out that the whole universe is in constant motion towards freedom. "In freedom it rises, in freedom it rests." He not only advocates spiritual freedom or emancipation from the bonds of Maya but also stands for the freedom in its totality - physical, mental and spiritual. To Vivekananda, the material world means laws; and laws mean slavery from whose clutches it is impossible to escape. From this dictum Vivekananda came to the conclusion that the body, the material being, is subordinated to the laws of nature and that the soul, the spiritual being, is caged in the body.⁵

The soul as such is independent of the laws of the material world. It always aspires for freedom and rebels against the laws of nature. He says : "There is unconscious struggle of the human with the spiritual, of the lower with the higher mind ... to preserve one's 'individuality'.... we are born rebels... No law for us. As long as we obey the laws we are like machines, and on goes the universe, and we cannot break it... Freedom is the song of the soul." Vivekananda further says : "The goal of each soul is freedom, mastery - freedom from the slavery of matter, and thought, mastery of external and internal nature. A third contribution of Vivekananda is his concept of strength and fearlessness which, in terms of political philosophy, can be called theory of resistance.⁶

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. But although Vivekananda did not openly advocate any theory of Indian nationalism in opposition to British imperialism, he was intensely devoted to the cause of the emancipation of the poor and the downtrodden. Instead of talking about political freedom and social justice, he talked about a more basic concept—strength. Without strength we can neither preserve our individual existence nor can we fight for the vindication of our rights. Only through sustained efforts and constant perseverance can a person succeed in the struggle for existence. Character develops through resistance to impediments. As a spiritual teacher Vivekananda has given to the country the ideal of fearlessness and strength. According to Vivekananda, the Vedantic ideal of the divinity and solidarity of man provides the only stable foundation for the theory and practice of democracy. Vivekananda exhorted us to build our democracy on this solid foundation. Western democratic structure is built on the concept of the sense. The bound man; it has its seasonal disturbances each succeeding one being more serious than the preceding.⁷

If, on the contrary, we infuse our democracy the spiritual idealism of our country and treat every man, in the words of Vivekananda, not as a means but as an end in itself we shall be creating a social order where man will become the focus and centre of all value, and which will breathe the spirit of harmony and universality. Vivekananda considers liberty as the first condition of growth of an individual in the society. He treats liberty as a natural right of the individual, but as a member of society is liberty is restricted by the liberty of others. An

individual can make full use of his capacities to develop his personality without any harm done to others. According to Vivekananda, the rights are the products of social circumstance. They cannot be independent of society. The contents of rights are very largely dependent upon the customs and ethos of society, at a particular time and place. No list of absolute rights which are universally applicable can be formulated.⁸

Vivekananda believes in the principle of 'Give and take. He who takes, gives and he who gives takes. One cannot exist without the other. In a society in which people care less for their own duties and more for their rights, sooner or later, they are deprived of all their rights. In the absence of performing duties, the society will be reduced to the status of a jungle in which ultimately the law of might will prevail. Hence, according to Vivekananda obligations to society are more important than the rights to be enjoyed in society. Vivekananda emphasises that duties must be performed without any selfish motive. It must be done with a sense of duty. One should perform his duty like a free man free from anger and jealousies. He says, "Duty is seldom sweet. It is only when love greases its wheels it runs smoothly; it is a continuous friction otherwise. He further instructs that duty should be performed with devotion and as the highest worship "The right performance of the duties of any station in life, without attachment to results, leads us to the highest realisation of the perfection of the soul. Vivekananda believes that society is a graded organisation. Concept of morality and duty varies greatly from culture to culture. What is regarded as moral in one culture may in another be considered perfectly immoral."⁹

For instance, in one culture cousins may marry; in another, it is thought completely immoral. So is the case with duty. One class of society thinks that certain things are among its duty, while another class, thinks just the opposite. Thus duty and morality differ from culture to culture....and. from class to class. Yet Vivekananda says that inspite of these variances There must be a universal standard of morality and duty. Vivekananda found democracy in complete conformity to the Indian traditions. He regards self government as a training school for individuals. Since it is based on the Vedantic principle of equality of man it is bound to promote justice and love for the country. Vivekananda was a social realist. He certainly wanted the materialistic and dynamic West to imbibe an introspective and subjective psychology.¹⁰

But his message to his own countrymen was realistic and pragmatic. His experiences during his travels in India and the West revealed to him the imperative necessity of strength and fearlessness for strengthening the backbone of a nation subjected to misery, frustration and political tragedies for over a thousand years. He was intensely conscious of the miseries of India's millions. It is indeed a revolutionary statement from the mouth of a sannyasin when he says "It is mockery to offer religion to a starving man". He further says that Indian is a country where millions of people live on flowers of the mahua plant, and a million or so of Sadhus and a hundred million or so of Brahmans suck the blood out of these poor people." Thus, it is clear that this mighty champion of the superiority of the spiritual metaphysics of the Hindus was unyielding in his fervent and eloquent appeal for the "elevation of the masses" because "the nation lives in the cottage".¹¹

As a social revolutionary, Vivekananda denounced the evils of caste and held the Brahman priesthood responsible for suppression of the lower classes by having created the maya of caste distinctions. He believes that India's political slavery of a thousand years is rooted in the suppression of the masses. The social tyrants and aristocratic despots of the country exploited the millions of masses. They held the latter in disgust and contempt and humiliated them so much that they 11 almost lost their humanity. With such degradation of the life-

blood of the nation, India could not stand as a match for the foreign invader. The masses are the "backbone of the country", because they produce all wealth and food. When they are rejected and humiliated, how shall they contribute to the growth of national energy? For any rejuvenation of the country, it was essential to take positive and constructive steps for raising the masses up. The millions and millions of Indian people were to be saved from the four evils of, (i) priestcraft, (ii) poverty, (iii) tyranny, and (iv) ignorance. This was a formidable problem and necessarily demanded a great sacrifice on the part of educated Indians. Vivekananda, hence, declared, "I hold every man a traitor, who having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them." He mercilessly denounced the sophistication, the arrogance and the wickedness of the upper classes of Indian society. They have been responsible for exploiting the millions of masses throughout India's history.¹²

While the latter perpetrated political and economic exploitation of the poor sections, the former enchained the masses with new complicated ceremonies and rituals. He outspokenly denounced caste oppressions and as a believer in the atman and Brahman refused to recognize any social barrier between man and man. His creed of spiritual perfection sanctions the belief that all souls, howsoever imperfectly, are advancing in their own way to redeem their spiritual birthright of eternal light, knowledge and immortality. Between real spiritual souls, it was a sin to erect any kind of barrier or wall of superiority and social hierarchy. The advocacy of social equality that one finds in Vivekananda's writing, is a mighty antidote to the dominant conservatism and the theory of right social stratification that pervade the Brahmanical smritis. 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."

This concept of equal chances is definitely in the socialist direction. Vivekananda wants to raise the lower sections of society by the advocacy of this theory. It reminds one of the concepts of equality of opportunity propounded in the various schools of democratic socialism. But he was conscious of the weakness of the western gospels of socialism and anarchism. He would not sanction a violent revolution for effectuating the goal of socialism.¹³ He believed in organic growth. But certainly he was a great social realist who was conscious of caste oppressiveness in Indian society and who left the crying urgency of the solution of the problems of food and hunger. Hence he wanted that socialism should be given a chance, "if for nothing else, for the novelty of the thing," and also because a redistribution of pain and pleasure is always more commendable than the same sections monopolizing pleasure to themselves".

Vivekananda pointed out that contradictions gave rise to our political, social, and economic problems; every attempt by reformers or scientists to solve them only created fresh problems. Vivekananda's conception of an ideal society was a society in which diversity of capacity and occupation would remain, but in which privilege would be totally unknown. All this required a root and branch reform, but he believed that such reform could not come through a revolution based on force. It could be ushered in only through evolution based on culture and mutual esteem. There exists a unity among all those distinct objects.¹⁴ This unity pervades the whole universe. We can find unity in the midst of diversity through knowledge. He again says: "That particular relation by which man finds this sameness.... is known as Natural Law." To prove the oneness of all beings Vivekananda further uses the organic analogy in his analysis of society. According to him, the aggregate of many individuals is called Samshti (the whole) and each individual is called Vyashti (a part). An individual, an animal, bird, a worm,

an insect, a tree, a creeper, the earth, a planet, a star - each is a part of the universe - the whole. He writes "Ishwara is the sum total of individuals.

Vivekananda wants nations of the world to realize this basic concept of unity of all existence to bring lasting peace: He says that Science has proved that, physically, individuality is a delusion, when reason is transmuted through love, there arises knowledge which enables us to experience, here and now, the Unity of Being. Giving the definition of science, he says that Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science reaches perfect unity, it would refuse to progress further, because it would have reached the goal.¹⁵ This conception of one world was an integral part of Vivekananda's mental make-up and it gave him the moral strength for preaching the same to the whole world. He was a great mediator between the East and the West, and while bringing the message of the East to the West he unhesitatingly took his dip deep in the spring of Western life and anointed the West with the East's life-giving waters of spirituality but also the 19 active vital humanitarianism and organisation of the West which he could accept at once for transmission to his ancient nation.

Vivekananda believed in the ultimate unity of the whole mankind. If we look at history, we notice the continuous march of mankind from small groupings and structures to higher and higher integrations and organisations. Thus the history of humanity is an arresting story of greater and greater integrations. The UN is undoubtedly more broadbased than the League of Nations. The future organisation of mankind will approximate towards the ideal of human unity which Vedanta philosophy of Vivekananda has set before us. His concept regarding it stood in sharp contrast to western approach of both ancient and modern political theorists. He opined that no nation can live confined to itself, particularly in these days when science and technology have brought man near to each other and made them interdependent. It is only by mutual cooperation and exchange of goodwill that nations can live at peace. Most of the human -tragedies are due to a nation's disbelief in this great truth. He knows that patriotism and love for one's own culture are good but if these noble sentiments are used to develop hatred for others, they become the cause of strife.¹⁶

He believed that a fake sense of superiority in 20 a particular culture or narrow love for one's own country, or even blind bigotry about the greatness of one's religion has, time and again, brought disaster in human history. It is only in ignorance and selfish blindness to truth that, one nation has taken up arms against another, or a society has tried to inflict its culture on another through gross or subtle methods. Vivekananda rightly points out that if people want to get rid of strife, they will have to see that their national life must contribute to and co-operate with the general welfare of mankind, making it strong, efficient, and, at the same time humble and helpful. It must be based upon toleration and universal brotherhood.

Conclusion

To sum up Vivekananda rightly observed that the way to universal peace and good-will, lay through realization of the unity of existence and the solidarity of mankind. He says: "One atom in the universe cannot move without dragging the whole world along with it. There cannot be any progress without the whole world following in its wake, and it is becoming every day clearer that the solution of any problem can never be attained on racial, national, or narrow grounds. This led the pluralist to attack the monistic concept of sovereign state. Internationalists held that the notion of an independent sovereign state is fatal to the well-being of humanity. One state cannot be the sole judge in relation to other states. In spite of all that the Western states are sticking to the old concept of

sovereign independent states and seeking ways and means to preserve a false unity. Two world wars are proof of this. Hence the way to universal peace and good will lies through the realization of the unity of existence as conceived by Swami Vivekananda. Indeed by taking up the role of a world teacher Vivekananda was bringing to the world the essence of unity of universal religion, in which "the Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

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