Chapter - IV

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S
IDEA OF DEMOCRACY
Looked at from the point of view of age-old social tradition and composition, democracy in India should be society-based. Any idea or institution which is not based on a strong foundation is destined to collapse some day or other. Same is the case with parliamentary democracy in India. India as an independent country was born democratic. When the British relinquished power in India in 1947, they left behind a parliament. So India adopted parliamentary democracy without an appropriate framework. Parliamentary democracy in India is based on a very weak foundation, that is, 200 years of British dominance and administration in India, and some of the reformative laws introduced by the British in India in their own colonial interests. So in India merely the framework of parliamentary democracy exists but not the essence of it.

After returning to India in early 1897, Swami Vivekananda said in reply to Paramakudi Address: “The Western world is governed by a handful of Shylocks. All those things that you hear about—constitutional government, freedom, liberty and Parliament— are but jokes”.1 Outwardly, Western countries maintain democratic or republican form of Government. But behind this outward form corruption prevails. Swami Vivekananda was not in favour of the parliamentary democracy of the Western variety. This is brought out clearly by the following statement:

“I have seen your Parliament, your Senate, your vote, majority, ballot. It is the same everywhere. The powerful men in every country are moving society whatever way they like, and the rest are only like flock of sheep.”2

Though vote and ballot, in his view, give the people some sort of opportunity to express themselves, he was not in favour of them for the system is prone to be corrupt.

“... They that have money have kept the government of the land under their thumb, are robbing the people and sending them as soldiers to fight and be slain on the foreign shores, so that, in case of victory, their coffers may be full of gold brought by the subject-people on the field of battle. And the subject-people? Well, theirs is only to shed their blood.”3
Thus Western democracy deviates from its basic aim, that is, the welfare of the people.

Swamiji had realised that unless the Indian masses who form the backbone of the country were raised from their lowly state, there was no hope for building up a new India. He wanted equality among men and equal opportunities for all. No man is inferior to the other and no class could claim to possess any special qualification by which it might bring another class under its domination. He believed that birth is nothing; the environment is everything. Thus the classification of society into four classes is not based on birth but on the work done by the different persons in the society. Thus the four classes—the priestly class, the warrior class, the mercantile class and the working class enjoy the power by turn. Each of these classes during their reign perform certain welfare measures as well as certain work against the general welfare.

Swami Vivekananda believed that societal power, whether concentrated in the hands of the priestly class, the warrior class or the mercantile class should be transferred to the common people. But 'such is the queer working of Māya' that the ruling class soon becomes oblivious of the nature of the process and makes every effort to cling to the power of which they are nothing but temporary repository. In his words, the devotion, the self-control and the sacrifice of the priestly class which was engaged in the path of finding the truth during the time of development is completely exhausted in obtaining material products or extension of power before destruction.4 So, a conflict naturally ensues if society attains maturity and seeks to wrest power from the ruling class.

The main reason for the decline and fall of India was that the common people had no say in state affairs. So they could not identify the rulers' cause with their own. Swamiji said: "Whether the leadership of society be in the hands of those who monopolise learning or wield the power of riches or arms, the source of its power is always the subject masses. By so much as the class in power severs itself from this source, that much it is sure to become weak."5 Vivekananda
said: “Where the monarchy is controlled by the voice of the ruling race, or where a republican form of Government rules the conquered race, a wide distance is created between the ruling and the ruled. And most part of the Government power... is engaged... in its attempts to keep the subject race under its entire control...”6

But, though there is wide divergence of opinion about the character and components of democracy, there is an agreement regarding the two basic principles of democracy— liberty and equality. So any social philosophy which has these two elements can be called democracy. Neo-Vedānta of Swami Vivekananda is such a philosophy because its cardinal message consists in liberty and equality.

Neo-Vedāntic liberty implies liberation of the spirit, the basis of which is the Upaniṣads, the Gita and other Hindu scriptures. Swamiji said: “... The Upaniṣads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigourate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energised through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the downtrodden of all races, all creeds and all sects, to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are watchwords of the Upaniṣads.”7 This is the basic democratic idea on which Vivekananda’s ideal society is based. Democracy as a social ideal is a fraternal enterprise of free individuals, and Vivekananda’s ideal society is a fraternal organisation dedicated to the ideal of perfection— of full blooming forth of free individuals. The individual progresses towards freedom. In Vivekananda’s view, this freedom is not freedom from society, but it is freedom in society along with others. This ‘freedom in society along with others’ implies the ideals of equality and fraternity. Social harmony or cooperation can be brought about in the light of Vedāntic principles of liberty, equality, justice, indiscrimination and love. Liberty, in Vivekananda’s philosophy, is identifiable with ‘self-realization, salvation, truth and harmony.’8 This may be called the inner freedom. This is the traditional Indian concept of freedom in which there is a close relation between liberty and one’s own will. Swami Vivekananda incorporated the Western idea.

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of social and political liberty to the Indian concept. So in Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy freedom means internal as well as external freedom. In his view liberty is that condition which enables one to make his own fortune. “If I cannot be the maker of my fortune, then I am not free.”

If liberty is to be real there cannot be any special privileges. But he believed that opportunities are needed for the manifestation of the potentiality of the individual. These opportunities are nowadays called ‘rights’. Prof. Ernest Barker points out that it is through a clear philosophy of rights alone that the idea of liberty can attain a concrete meaning. The demand of any particular class for some specific rights is not justified because in that case the masses are deprived. The class-interests should never go against the interests of the common people. In Vivekananda’s view, since the source of the state authority is the common people, their rights are to be considered first. He therefore urges the banishment of all privileges, and the elimination of all kinds of propitiation. Swami Vivekananda’s thought is based on the Jivabrahmavāda of Vedānta philosophy. ‘Every man has the same divine power in him’— this is the main theme of Vedānta which indicates that all men are entitled to equal rights. This is the philosophy of India.

We should work for ‘that knowledge which will bring the feeling of sameness towards mankind.’ When one arrives at this state of equality, he attains true freedom. Liberty, thus, is not only based upon equality, but it is fully identical with it.

Swami Vivekananda’s plea for popular sovereignty reflects his passion for democracy, for democracy stands for the rule of the people. But democracy does not imply merely a particular mode of government, it also refers to a way of social life. When democracy is used in this latter sense as a social ideal, it implies a democratic spirit or temper and we can refer to such ideals as freedom, equality, fraternity, dignity of the individual etc., in their full significance. It cannot be denied that democracy as a form of government becomes an elevated ideal when it is grounded on popular sovereignty. But political democracy is never the highest
social ideal; only what is called social democracy can be regarded as such. Whatever may be the form of democracy, its basic principle is always equality and liberty, and other ideals follow from it. ‘Social democracy, therefore, means permeation of the entire social organisation by the principle of equality.’ In such an atmosphere the members feel to be equals of one another and also to be parts of the whole. This is a reflection of the principle of unity, which is the basic tenet of Vedānta. The individual’s life is in the life of the whole, the individual’s happiness is in the happiness of the whole; apart from the whole, the individual's existence is inconceivable—this is an eternal truth and is the bed-rock on which the universe is built.

Swami Vivekananda believed that self-government is the best form of government for the people. Benevolent rule by a king can be no substitute for self-government. The same view is expressed by John Stuart Mill in his famous book ‘Representative Government’. He says that a good government is no substitute for self-government. According to Swami Vivekananda, ‘Even if the kings be of as godlike nature as that of Yudhishthira, Ramachandra, Dharmashoka, or Akbar, under whose benign rule the people enjoyed safety and prosperity, and were looked after with paternal care by their rulers, the hand of him who is always fed by another gradually loses the power of taking the food to his mouth. His power of self-preservation can never become fully manifest who is always protected in every respect by another. Even the strongest youth remains but a child if he is always looked after as a child by his parents. Being always governed by kings of godlike nature, to whom is left the whole duty of protecting and providing for the people, they can never get any occasion for understanding the principles of self-government.’ Such a nation becomes gradually destitute of power and vitality, being entirely dependent on the king. It this “dependent” and “protected” class lasts for long, decadence is sure to follow. There can be, according to him, no substitute for democracy. However, it should be pointed out that Swami Vivekananda did not support the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest inducted into the field of political philosophy by Herbert Spencer. Rejection or
annihilation has no room in his mind. He wanted men to be competent so that they can do their work by themselves.

Because of these reasons, democracy is considered to be the best form of government by Swami Vivekananda. He defined democracy as ‘the consent of the ruled in the working of the government’ which is the basic tenet of the Western world. The last expression of this has been echoed in the Declaration of the American Government, in the words, ‘the government of the people of this country must be by the people and for the good of the people.’

‘...The voice of the ruled in the government... cannot, however, be said to have been totally unrecognised in ancient India... And there cannot be the least doubt about it that the germ of self-government was at least present in the shape of the village Panchayat... But the germ remained for ever the germ; the seed though put in the ground never grew into a tree.’

It was never extended outside the village Panchayat.

‘In the religious communities, among Sannyasins in the Buddhist monasteries, we have ample evidence to show that self-government was fully developed. Even now, one wonders to see how the power of the Panchayat system, of the principles of self-government, is working amongst the Naga Sannyasins...’

It is a fact that the Indo-Aryan masses enjoyed a substantial amount of liberty before the rise of Mauryan Empire. But this liberty went out of existence in North India since the rise of Gupta Empire and in the South with the rise of the medieval Vijayanagara Empire. The Indian masses were never conscious of their power; nor did they organise themselves for united action, as Swami Vivekananda commented, whenever a state had arisen out of the coalescence of different tribes and a king had been asked to assume authority, he would make no delay in crushing the diverse factions that made his rise possible.

Swami Vivekananda knew where the weakness of our society and people lay. Moreover, occidental life and society made him compare them with the institutions of his own country and he found out the weakness of our society.
Being well aware of the weakness, he wanted a thorough reconstruction of society. His programme was: "A hundred thousand men and women... should go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of equality." This was his plan for the uplift of the downtrodden masses. He developed the idea of 'mutual help' for bringing about the welfare of society. He believed that the Indian society was not bad but good, he only wanted it to be better still. He felt the need to enthuse our countrymen with 'a spirit of organised brotherhood, a sense of goodwill and cooperation— those essentials which are conducive to the growth of an organised public life.' He wanted cooperation or mutual aid to be the basis of our activities. He demanded that educated Indians should cultivate a keen sense of responsibility to the masses and stressed on the education of the masses. He realized that unless the Indian masses were raised from their lowly state, there was no hope for the reconstruction of new India. The basis of true welfare, be it in the field of society, politics or spiritualism, is the feeling of equality, and this is true not only for India but for all the nations. 'Equality, to be real, must be associated with liberty and fraternity, which are the two other elements of a just social order.' Aurobindo also echoed: "Three words have the power of remoulding nations and governments, liberty, equality and fraternity. These words, cast forth into being from the great stir and movement of the eighteenth century, continue to act on man because they point to the ultimate goal towards which human evolution ever moves."

Swami Vivekananda visualised a socio-economic revolution of the future which would culminate in the birth of social democracy. "Hence, 'for forms of government let fools contest', what conduces to democracy best is the best." However well-meaning and welfare-promoting the ruling class may be, if this criterion is not fulfilled, Vivekananda would regard it as a perversion. 'He would then be one with H.C. Bannerman in that "better bad government under self-government than good government under... dictatorship."'

Thus, under all circumstances he was a supporter of individual freedom and he believed that freedom is the first condition of development. Welfare of the
society is to be looked after for the purpose of safeguarding the interests of the individual. There is no welfare in making the individuals forcefully sacrificing themselves for the society. Sacrifice brings the highest welfare only when it is natural. He thus, pointed out, that the type of socialism which sacrifices individual freedom, far from being perfect, does no good to man. The path laid down by him is establishing equality not by bringing an end to individual freedom, but the establishment of equality by ending all kinds of special privileges for the development of individuals. The more the special privileges are destroyed, the more there is the light of knowledge and advancement in that society.27

Swami Vivekananda dreamt of the emergence of a new India which would grow out of the spontaneous cooperation of free people. There would be the harmonisation of the spiritualism of Vedānta and the power of Islam in this society. He was in favour of the pursuit of a dynamic life dedicated to the cult of Humanism— ‘Mānava Dharma’ and the doctrine of synthesis— ‘Samavayavāda’. He established the theory of ‘social humanism’ or socialism to build up the base of a new India. He was thus the beginner of a new era.

“If it is possible to form a state in which the knowledge of the priest period, the culture of the military, the distributive spirit of the commercial, and the ideal of the last one [the Shudras] can all be kept intact, minus their evils it will be an ideal state.”28 And this is what can be designated as ‘the true democracy.’

While the Western politics centres round ‘power’, politics in India centres round ‘welfare’. In the West the end is individual freedom, the language is economics, the means to achieve it is politics. In India the aim is emancipation, the language is the Veda and the means is sacrifice. In the West people want to achieve social development through economic development while in India we want to achieve social power through spirituality. And this has been possible because it is Dharma that rules India. Swami Vivekananda’s thought is based on Jivabrahmaavāda of Vedānta which says— ‘Every man has the same divine power in him’. This is the philosophy of India. So any form of government in India should be in conformity with the philosophy of India— it should be society centred
because there is so much difference between the ends and means of Western and Indian society that anything which is an imitation of the West is destined to be a failure in India.

Notes and References
3. Ibid.
6. Ibid., Vol. IV, pp. 474-75.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 10.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 11.


25. Ibid., p. 245.

26. Ibid.

