CHAPTER - VII
DISRAELI’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

After this brief critical survey of his novels, we have so far attempted, we are now in a position to throw some light on Disraeli’s political philosophy, as presented in his works.

Benjamin Disraeli was, perhaps, the first and the only noted English novelist to become Prime Minister of England. A comparison between his writings and his political actions testifies to a close relationship between these two aspects of his personality. That is why, his works are often used as key to his political life and philosophy. But in Robert Blake’s view “though he [Disraeli] never abandoned or denied his own philosophy, it had little effects on his actions.” However, we are inclined to believe that views propounded in his writings were actually translated into actions whenever circumstances favoured him. It is on record that schemes of social ameliorations and other political programmes as advocated, for example, in *Sybil* and *Tancred*, were given effect to during the tenure of his office.

It may be noted that an arithmetical consistency between one’s political philosophy and its practical application is hardly possible. A politician in power has to get himself adjusted to the current public opinion, and to modify his stand according to the demand of the day. According to Disraeli, as he says in *The Crisis Examined* “A statesman is the creature of his age, a child of circumstances, the creation of his times,” and so in his move, “he is only to ascertain the needful and the beneficial.” Naturally, no politician, including even Disraeli, could be an exception to this tried principle. Froude’s assessment of Disraeli on this count may be more helpful. He says that almost all his [Disraeli’s] novels reflect his projected line of action, though of course, they are somewhat coloured by his own self-interest and over-ambitious idealistic imagination.

We believe that Disraeli wrote his novels with the purpose of advertising whatever
he believed in as a man and as a statesman.

While tracing Disraeli's political philosophy, it will be profitable to know the working of his mind at the initiation of his political career. Anxious though he was to enter the British Parliament he was indecisive, in the beginning, to party alliances. In his first election speech delivered from the portico of the Red-Lion at High Wycombe, he said that he was sprung from the people, and that he preferred "the happiness of the many to the unhappiness of the few." He was very clear in his stand that he would like to be a popular and not a party candidate. Somehow, he was opposed to party alliance and makes a caustic remark in this regard in Vivian Grey:

.... of all the delusions which flourish in this mad world, the delusion of that man is the most frantic who voluntarily and of his own accord supports the interest of a party.¹

This statement obviously indicates the inexperience of a political aspirant. It took him not long to realize that there could be no easier and more convenient passport to Parliament of England than a party emblem. But even then he was not satisfied with the existing political parties. We find him warning his electorate, in his second election speech to "beware of political jargon and factitious slang of Whig and Tory; two names with one meaning to delude you." The same annoyance he gives expression to in Falconet: "a Liberal or a Conservative mere jargon, different names for the same thing."² So in his next election-pamphlet entitled What is He? he put forth a proposal for a National party--that was to be a coalition between the Tories and the Radicals. The proposed party was to assist progress and resist revolution. Disraeli was more inclined towards the Radicals because of his friend Bulwer and also because the Radicals were against the Whigs, so he preferred an intimacy with the Radicals to crush the Whigs.

Thus for long Disraeli was faced with the problem--what party to join: But he was no opportunist as people suspected. At Taunton, Edward
quotes him saying, "Gentleman, had I been a political adventurer I had nothing to do but join the Whigs; but conscientiously believing that their policy was in every way pernicious, I felt it my duty to oppose them." Moreover, there was an additional hindrance to his becoming a Whig. One could become a Tory but one had to be a born Whig. There were some sound reasons for his not liking the Whigs. He was against England being ruled by a small knot of great families; he felt that the "Union of oligarchical wealth and mob-poverty is the very essence of the spirit of Whiggism." Moreover, the Whigs wanted centralization of power which, according to Disraeli, was a death-blow to public freedom; so he opposed them.

Under the circumstances discussed above Disraeli's indecisive attitude towards party alliances was nothing unusual. Monypenny, commenting on this attitude of his, remarks:

It is no accident that there is a certain ambiguity about the party-affiliation of nearly all our great statesmen: Chatham, Pitt, Burke, Canning, Peel, Palmerston, Disraeli and Gladstone—none of these has an absolutely consistant party record.³

But Disraeli even after his party affiliation, remained fidgetting till the very end of his life.

Disraeli was well aware of the fact that the Tories, because of their out-moded political notions and also because they favoured 'no-change', were booed by the public. But the Radical in him inspired him to work on a new line which he called Tory-democracy, and to propagate its ideologies he formed a new party and wrote three novels. This new Toryism was nothing but a mixture of the aristocratic and the democratic principles. Disraeli wanted the old pattern of the feudal society but in a socialized form. Thus his Young England party was an antithesis to other liberal Young parties of Europe. It is said that Karl Marx criticized Disraeli's feudal socialism of the Young England party as, "Half lamentation, half lampoon, half echo of the past, half menace of the future, at
time, by its witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core." One may or may not agree with Marx's criticism of Disraeli's views about Tory democracy, it may however be admitted that credit goes to Disraeli for infusing new blood thereby, into the dry bones of the Conservative party ultimately bringing it to power.

Disraeli's new-Toryism itself is a proof of his dissatisfaction of the existing political parties. As by writing political novels he gave English literature a new genre of novels; so his new Toryism was also a novelty for the political England. Commenting on Disraeli's political philosophy under reference George Lichtheim, in his book *Imperialism*, says that -

Disraeli invented a new Toryism, a clever mixture of imperialism abroad and inexpensive social reforms at home. The mixture became popular and by the 1880's Gladston's Liberal party felt obliged to adapt itself to the trend.

In spite of his mixed political philosophy of the Young England Party, history stands witness to prove that Disraeli was a born Tory, but in matters concerning the state and conditions of the people he was a Radical too. He was loud enough in his sympathy for the neglected classes of society, but it would be wrong on our part to think that he was a leveller. In *Coningsby*, through Millbank, he declares:

I look upon an artificial equality as equally pernicious with a factitious aristocracy, both depressing the energies and checking the enterprise of nation. I like men to be free, really free, free in his industry, as well as his body. Further he elaborates, that "By the conservative cause I mean the splendour of the Crown, the lustre of the Peerage, the privileges of the Commons, the rights of the Poor," and he clarifies his statement by further adding: "I mean that harmonious union, that magnificent concord of all interests, of all classes on which our national greatness and prosperity depends." For this purpose he recommended,

I wish to see the agriculture, the commerce, and the manufacturers of England, not adversaries, but co-mates and
partners, and rivals only in the ardour of their patriotism and in the activity of their public spirit.

Disraeli was in favour of a harmonious relationship of all classes and that explains why he was opposed to the Utilitarians. He was against them because they wanted to vest all social and political privileges in the new Industrial class. Disraeli disliked such pampered privileges monopolized by a particular class and very logically and correctly pleaded "who dares to be good, dares to be great."

Disapproving class-based distinction in the English society, Disraeli proposed and favoured only two social entities: "the throne at the centre and the people at the circumference." He appears to be very definite in his view that "on the maintenance of their normal and unimpeded inter-action the health and balance of all depends." In Coningsby he declared that "The popular leader of the people is the individual who sits upon the throne." The logic behind this view was his unambiguous belief that "the only power that has no class sympathy is the sovereign." In the same trend he asserted that the Monarchy of the Tories was more democratic than the Republic of the Whigs.

In this context it will be useful to note that Disraeli pleaded even against the House of Commons, and thought that it was not a representative body of the people, but it was the House of few, whereas the sovereign was the sovereign of all. For such utterances he became famous in the English politics as an Imperialist. Monypenny thinks that this tendency was Disraeli's racial quality. He is of the view that "The Jews as a race are monarchical in sentiment," and Monypenny is quite right.

We will also see in the following discussion that Disraeli's racial tendency was for Aristocracy, and by nature he was inclined towards that class. In Lord George Bentinck, Disraeli states that "all the tendencies of the Jewish race are conservative, their bias into religion, property and natural aristocracy." But he defended his aristocratic views by pleading that it is not true that England
is governed by an aristocracy in the common acceptation of the term, but “England is governed by an aristocratic principle, that is, to aspire and to excel.” This aristocracy, which he rationalized, was not to be hereditary but was to be constituted by “those men whom a nation recognizes as the most eminent for their virtue, talents and property.” But they should not govern through money, he stressed. Like a true democrat, Disraeli admitted that as “they guide opinion, therefore they govern.” In short, Disraeli believed earnestly in a kind of enlightened aristocracy. He treated, what we might call, aristocracy as the natural leader of the people and declared that with the labouring classes they formed the nation.

But he often criticized the Aristocracy because they had forgotten their duties. “The tenure of property should be the fulfilment of duty,” was his idealistic view. He advised them to turn back and adopt the traditions of the Middle Ages. He regarded that, unlike the New Rich, the Aristocracy had been in co-existence with the Peasantry. To this effect he writes, in The Vindication of the English Constitution, that “the order of the peasantry was as ancient, legal and recognized an order as the order of the Nobility.” He criticized the Whigs, who, along with the Benthamites, regarded the Reform Act of 1832 as their triumph, because thereby they

disenfranchised the gentry and the real patriotism of the nation, and thrown the balance of power into the hands of that class (the shopkeepers) which in all centuries, in all ages, has been, is now, and ever will be the least patriotic and the least conservative of any...

He was bitter against the Reform Act of 1832 also because, in his view, according to the provisions of the Act,

a man who rents a ten pound house in a town enjoys a suffrage (but) a man who lives in a forty pound house out of a town is not an elector.

Disraeli could not tolerate the new aristocracy monopolizing both wealth and power because of this Act. He wanted them to opt for one of them.
Today it is very difficult to appreciate Disraeli's Aristocratic principles, but, like Carlyle, he regarded Aristocracy as the least corrupted part of the community. He had developed a dislike for the New Rich who, as he said, while speaking in Parliament on the Charatist petition, "had been invested with political station" and "had not been bound up with the mass by the exercise of corresponding obligations." So he wished that "the true friend of the people ought to be Aristocracy." He was sorry to note that Restoration downwards Aristocracy, shutting itself out in palaces, led a life of selfish luxury, leaving the poor to curse their lot. He very well realized that the New Rich, though jealous of the territorial Aristocracy, were no better in their personal habits. The working classes under them were leading a life of no less disgrace. He was categorical in his conclusion, when he said, that wealth could not rival blood and cautioned the society that "good laws are of little avail without good manners."

Thus, it is abundantly clear that Disraeli was inclined towards the territorial aristocracy. In this respect Disraeli stood closer to Carlyle. Carlyle, too, was an Imperialist, and hated democracy and advocated an intelligent aristocracy and at the same time he was in sympathy with the working-class people. He also pleaded for a moral regeneration of the English race. It may also be noted here that Carlyle, Newman and Disraeli were all opposed to the Benthamite economic philosophy and worked against it.

Whereas in the points discussed above Disraeli came nearer to Carlyle, in his theory of traditional conservatism he was the follower of Burke, as is quite clear from the full-throated homage that he paid to the supreme genius of Edmund Burke in the third chapter of *Sybil*. According to Disraeli, Burke "was a great writer; as an orator he was transcendent." Recording his political contributions, he further writes,

Burke, effected for the Whigs what Bolingbroke in a preceding age had done for the Tories .... He taught them to recur to the ancient principles of their connection.
Making a brief comparative study of these two politicians (Burke and Disraeli) we arrive at the conclusion that, like Burke, Disraeli believed that “the foundation of civil polity is convention.” He looked upon the nation as a family and upon the country as a landed inheritance. There is one more parallelism between Disraeli and Burke. The Victorian politician believed that the national character and political institutions are woven into one whole, and you cannot change the one without altering the other. “Nations,” said Disraeli, have character as well as individuals, [and in] respect for precedent, clining to prescription, reverence for antiquity, [they] have their origin in a profound knowledge of human nature.11

Disraeli’s conception of Nation as a corporate state was also derived from Burke. In the similar strain, he pleaded, in The Vindication of the English Constitution that every subject was bound to respect the established constitution of his country. Because he believed that

Man was the child of the state and born with filial duties. To disobey the State, therefore, was a crime, to rebel against it a treason; to overrun it was parricide, he asserted like Burke.

Much against Rousseau, Disraeli thought that “a man’s natural duties came before his natural rights.” That is why he, like Burke, condemned the French Revolution. He felt hurt that “to secure equality they [the French] decided on indiscriminate destruction.” And according to his analysis, “They not only destroyed law and custom, but they destroyed their country;” by destroying the institutions of their country.

In this context while interpreting his attitude towards Monarchy we believe that Disraeli’s was not a romantic love for Monarchy, but it was born of a purposeful reaction against the upheaval in France. This also explains why he was very vocal in his support for the national institutions. Since his Tory party supported these institutions, he deemed it to be a National party. It may be noted here that Disraeli basically differed with Mill, the last of the Utilitarians, who preached against the tame acceptance of the conventional opinions.
Cazamian says:

All the political ideas of the Conservatives and the Traditionalists originate in the teaching of Burke. Disraeli's real master was Burke and no other.12

For Indian students of Disraeli it is interesting to note that like his predecessor, Burke, Disraeli also had sympathy for India. He was the only Victorian statesman who defended India after the revolt of 1857. Speaking on the India Bill, he called that movement a national revolt and not a sepoy mutiny, as others thought. He pleaded against the demand of meeting atrocities with atrocities. Like Burke, who made history by speaking against Warren Hastings, Disraeli too, while analysing the cause of Indian movement, said,

Our Empire in India was indeed founded on the principle of \textit{divide-et-impra...} producing discontent in all ranks, because of forcible destruction of native princes, our disturbance of settlement of property, our tampering with the religions of the people.

He regarded it a revolt against Dalhousie's anti-Indian policies. It may be pointed out here, that since 1815, there was a school of thought in England, mostly that of whigs, which believed in the Westernization of India. Bentinck, Macaulay and Dalhousie, all of them belonged to this school. But Disraeli was against this school of thought. He was definitely in favour of keeping and consolidating the Indian customs and traditions and was very sympathetic towards the religions of this highly civilized oriental community.

But it may not be misunderstood that Disraeli was in sympathy with national movements in other countries as well. He was against this type of wave which toppled many of the states in Europe after the downfall of Peel. He even refused to meet Garibaldi on the same ground. During the Civil War of America, he cautiously guarded himself against siding with the North. He thought that "the movement of the middle classes for the abolition of slavery was virtuous but not wise." Here he followed a policy of proud reserve and did not support a humanitarian cause.
Disraeli believed that "All power is a trust, that we are accountable for its exercise; that from the people and for the people, all spring and all must exist."[13] But this statement should not mislead us to believe that Disraeli was a democrat like Abraham Lincoln. The idea behind Disraeli’s concept of a democratic form of Government was, that it was a “Government of the people, for the people” but as Stapledon says:

by the best and the greatest of the people, that is, by a free aristocracy, supremely well-selected from the aristocracy of every class possessing talent, honesty and capacity to lead.[14]

Perhaps Disraeli forgot that ordinary men like him, possessing these qualities, could govern a country better, otherwise he would not have offered such a fantastic plea that the House of Lords was a better representative body than the House of Commons. His remark that “Aristocracy is democracy in disguise; and democracy, aristocracy in disguise,” created a wrong impression among the people against him. Sometimes his remarks were really very alarming and bewildering. In one of his election speeches, he warned the electorate by saying that “A House of Commons concentrating in itself the whole power of the State,” might “constitute despotism of the most formidable and dangerous description.” So he pleaded for the renovation of veto power to the Crown. He shocks the modern readers by saying at one place that, “an educated nation recoils from the imperfect vicariate of what is called a representative government,” and came out with his Eureka that “the tendency of advanced civilization is in truth to pure Monarchy.”

Because Disraeli thought that Parliament was sectionally chosen so it could not be an effective organ for public opinion, so he forwarded an alternative suggestion. According to him, a more direct, a more comprehensive and a more efficient organ, for its utterance, was the Press, which he believed, absorbed the duty of the Sorverign, the Priest and the Parliament. He was so much enamoured of its potentiality and capacity that he said, “God made man
in His own image; but the Public is made by the Newspapers.” While Disraeli should be congratulated for his high encomium to the Press, it appears surprising to find him belittling the Parliament for which he staked so much in life.

Self-Government appeared to him a self contradictory term. Whatever form a government might assume, the real power is always controlled and exercised by a minority, he used to say. We may admit that he was practically correct in his view. But like a true reformer he was ready to concede, as he pleaded in 1858, a larger representation in Parliament to the industrial class, and to all other national interests. In spite of all such plea, we doubt, Disraeli could be called a democrat in the modern sense of the term.

There cannot be two opinions about his conservatism, but in our opinion he was not a dogmatist in his faith in the traditional conservatism. He boldly owned that his National polity consisted of a free monarchy, established on fundamental laws, itself the apex of vast pile of municipal and local government, ruling an educated people represented by a free and intelligent press.

As a great conservative, Disraeli cared more for national values and tried to defend them. Like a conservative thinker, he supported the organic view of society against the atomic and abstract theory popularised by the French Revolution. He favoured the values created by history, not by mere units and majorities.15

According to Disraeli the determining factor of a nation’s greatness was its character and not its population. This view he expresses in the third letter of Letters of Runnymede, where he says, “A nation is not a mere mass of bipeds with no strength but their animal vigour, and no collective grandeur but that of their numbers.” He further suggests that “there is required to constitute that great creation, a nation character, serious and yet free.” And for that he recommended religious education to make man know God. So instead of placing education under state-control, he wanted to keep it under the clergy. As he
believed that man was something more than what his biological and physiological attributes made him; he was afraid that man without religion might turn into a wild beast. That is why he was also against Darwin’s theory of Evolution. He earnestly wished for an awakening of the Church to its social duties and favoured for a return to its social duties and to its old customs and ceremonies. ‘No dogma, no Dean’, was his famous apology for religious worship with all its pomp and show, Disraeli was writing all this in an age when Karl Marx was busy compiling his views against such conservative and theocratic opinions.

It is however suspected that Disraeli’s political philosophy basically aimed at exploiting people’s sentiments. While clarifying his nationalist philosophy, Disraeli touched a popular sentiment by saying that Land was the most important raw material for the stability and prosperity of a nation. He proposed, in his second Budget speech, “taking money out of the pocket of the people in towns and putting it into the pockets of the growers of the malt.” Here he appears to the speaking like the Finance Minister in a Socialistic set up. He was actually sorry to find that “the English agricultural industry is usually no better than a sick or uncared for child,” and laments in *Endymion* that “a farmer is the only trader who has no security for his capital.”

It appears that, though Disraeli was an imperialist, a Conservative, an Aristocrat, and a Traditionalist, he sometimes gave vent to ideas like a tried socialist. In this connection we may quote a sentence from his speech when, in 1848, he warned his contemporaries and said that “The Palace is not safe when the Cottage is not happy.” He pointed out that England marched past the revolutionary tendencies of the continent because the tenure of landed property was never changed.

As an active politician, it must be noted, he had to streamline his views about things political and social as warranted by the circumstances. He
could not forego changes guaranteeing success for his principles. That is why it becomes difficult to suppose that he had not sympathy for the down-trodden at a period of economic transition in the eighties. In this connection, it may be remembered that before Karl Marx came out with his socio-economic Bible, Disraeli had already preached in *Sybil*, like a bonafide socialist that, “If a society that had been created by labour, suddenly becomes independent of it, that society is bound to maintain the race whose property is labour, out of the proceeds of that property, which has not ceased to be productive.” We consider it to be a very bold statement made by a conservative politician of these days. Perhaps a bolder statement than this had never been made for the working-class until Marx appeared.

It may be pointed out here, that credit goes to Disraeli for granting the Charter of Trade Unionism. By passing the Workers’ Dwelling Act, he not only tried to improve the conditions and character of the working class of people but also did his best to bring about conditions and atmosphere favourable for a fair play between the employers and the employees.

It must, however, be especially noted that Disraeli appears to be more anxious to safeguard the privileges and self-respect of the working class in his legislations; he was nevertheless reluctant to add to their political rights. He saw no possibility of political equality between economically unequals. He rejected the demand of treating a vote as “an abstract of every Briton.” In support of this stand of his, he demarcated a line of distinction between the popular privileges and the democratic rights. A vote, according to him, was a reward for proved civic capacity. He boldly gave these views a concrete shape and form, and while presenting the Reform Bill of 1867, he made it clear that the bill was meant “to concede a liberal measure of popular privileges, but by no means democratic rights.” He could very well recommend admission of the choicest members of the working classes to Parliament. He was earnest when
he said that "opinions, not numbers, should be represented," and "votes should be weight not counted." He had respect for the individual personality of a man, but he was not in favour of new class recognitions.

To some people these may appear fake socialistic sermons of a philanthropic Radical, but Disraeli was really anxious to remove all that was bad in the English society. He wanted a change, but was in favour of achieving this change by the influence of opinion and yet by means of existing forces. He felt and warned that the gulf, between the rich and the poor, if allowed to widen, would be a great threat to English constitution. So with a great self-confidence he said that his Tory party

Will rise from the tomb over which Bolingbroke, the greatest supporter of the Crown, shed his last tear, to bring back strength to the Crown, liberty to the subject, and to announce that power has only one duty: to secure the social welfare of the People.18

This may be interpreted as a fond hope of Disraeli, but after analysing his political theories, it becomes abundantly clear that he was anxious to preserve the character of the English nation, its institutions and individuals and also to eradicate the misery of the common man. So it is not surprising, when by introducing a character—the Communist in his last novel Falconet, he says, "you and I know that attempting to terminate the misery of man, there is only one principle to recognize and that is the destruction of species." Perhaps towards the close of his life, Disraeli had started feeling the necessity for a class-less society; otherwise there could be no rational justification for the following sentence in the novel under reference: "Society is formed of classes and it may be necessary to destroy it in detail."

Before summing up Disraeli’s political Philosophy, let us refer to some of the important opinions of his close contemporaries; for example, people felt that Disraeli dealt in a curio of contradictions. In 1859, Palmerston charged him "as a democrat covered by the skin of a conservative."19 It was
also said that Politics to him was "a more matter of expediency, whereas to Gladstone it was a matter of morals." It was also pointed out that Disraeli’s political statements lacked consistency; and that was interpreted as his opportunism. Let us refer to some of Disraeli’s own statements in this context. While he pleaded to bow to the Spirit of the Age and preached in favour of the Press, he threw in a suggestion that “the Divine Right of government is the key-stone of human progress and that without it the government sunk into police and the nation is degraded into a mob.” But he contradicts himself by saying that “no government can long be secure without a formidable opposition,” and further adds that “where everything is left to government the subject became a machine.” Disraeli did sometimes make inconsistent political statements.

The change of inconsistency levelled against Disraeli is not quite unfounded, as the above illustrations clearly show. But we are inclined to believe that Disraeli’s public utterances were conditioned by the occasion, naturally inconsistency in statements was bound to be there. As expediency was the guiding principle of this political philosophy, no wonder then that Disraeli was nick-named “bare faced charlatan.”

Our discussions, in this chapter, have now reached a stage where we can succinctly summarize Disraeli’s political philosophy. We may define it in one word—England. He lived and worked to see England glorified in the world and felt convinced that England was safe “in the race of men who inhabit her. She is safe in her national character, and in the Traditions of a thousand years.” Perhaps he was projecting his own personal ambition through the national supremacy of England.

In our view, Disraeli’s political thesis was a corporation of the Monarchy, the nobility, the Press and a privileged working class. He was a Tory of the “deepest dye.” He had the political vision of Wolsey’s breadth. Today he
is remembered as one of the greatest Prime Ministers of England who raised the status of the country abroad, and the status of the working-classes at home. He worked for the glory of the British Empire, and also for the happiness of the British people. For generations to come he would be remembered for his practical wisdom and political adventures and achievements. It would not be a far-fetched analogy to compared the annual conference of the countries of the worthwhile British Commonwealth, today, with Disraeli's proposal for representation at Parliament of England of all the countries of the Victorian Empire. Though his political philosophy may appear somewhat bewildering, his political personality was glamorous. Disraeli should not be treated as an alien; he was a true British patriot.
REFERENCE

6. Ibid., p. 354.
10. Edward and Young, op. cit., p. 67.