CHAPTER-VII

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MYSTICISM OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA
CHAPTER-VII

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MYSTICISM OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

In this chapter unit social views of Swami Vivekananda are presented with a view to show him as a critic of society. Swami Vivekananda's criticism of Indian society and society at large find expression here. However, the main focus is on the Indian society. Vivekananda's mysticism has got driving force to the service of humanity. After the triumphant return from the west in 1897, Vivekananda found Ramakrishna Mission with a view to preach and practice the ideas of Advaita as well as to carry on philanthropic and relief work. So Vivekananda's Advaita was service oriented. G.S. Banahatti observes the service mentality of the Mission as, "On the philanthropic side, the work of the Mission is superb in its design and its execution. During the epidemics and famines the Mission worked marvelously. The Mission workers are even today known for their silent but substantial help to sufferers."\(^1\)

After establishing a monastery, Vivekananda for nearly five years from 1888 to 1893 wandered all over the country. In these years he had the opportunity of seeing the real face of India mixing with all classes of people, princes and beggars, Brahmins and pariahs. On the one side he observed grinding poverty of millions and millions of his poor countrymen living in their huts and, on the other,

the luxurious and ostentatious life of the rich in their palaces also felt pride in all the India’s past glories.

As for the India’s pride, Romain Rolland writes, “This very first journey had brought ancient India vividly before his eyes, eternal India, the India of the Vedas, with its race of heroes and gods, clothed in the glory of legend and history, Aryans, Moguls and Dravidians – all one. At the first impact he realized the spiritual unity of India and Asia, and he communicated this discovery to the brethren of Baranagore”. ²

With his mystical vision Vivekananda was able to identify religious unity throughout the breadth and width of the country. Equally noticeable sight that captured his attention was the poverty. As a mystic and a critic of society was able to detect the cause. The root cause as he felt, was the British Rule. As a critic of mystical insight was greatly stirred by the approaches of Britishers in India.

As a critic of Indian Society his appraisal of the effects of foreign rule in India have a great historical significance. The other side of the picture, as Vivekananda admits, is British rule unconsciously brought India once more into contact with the outside world. But Britishers were bent upon exploitation of Indians mass. Therefore he could assert as, “If it had been done with an eye to the


154
good of the people concerned, as circumstances favoured Japan with, the results could have been more wonderful for India.”

Vivekananda could sense with his critical sensibility the misdeeds of the British rule. The British were, in fact, not interested in the spread of education. Freedom of the press was curbed, whatever self-government that was granted was snatched away. Any innocent criticism was meted out with punishment. There was a complete reign of terror in India for some years. Vivekananda could not tolerate unruly behaviour of the British military in killing Indians and outraging Indian women. He refers to the height of tyranny as, “For writing a few words of innocent criticism, men are being hurried to transportation of life, others imprisoned without any trial; and nobody knows when his head will be off... We are in a terrible gloom – where is the Lord? Mary, you can afford to optimistic, can I? Suppose you simply publish this letter – the law just passed in India will allow the English Government in India to drag me from here to India and kill me without trial. And I know all your Christian Governments will only rejoice, because we are heathens” Added to this, Vivekananda says, even Christian missionaries were docile not to open their mouth against British atrocities on Indians.

The preceding observation made by Vivekananda is a true comment on the effects of the English rule in India. It also shows how deeply Vivekananda was concerned with socio-political phenomenon of the British reign. Vivekananda has

4 Vivekananda Vol.8 476-77.
probed into the problems of colonial rule in India which not only meant plunder of the wealth of the country, but had also profoundly affected the productive capacity of the country as a whole, thus converting it into a poor country regularly suffering from terrible famines. Over all it was gloomy picture of Indian scene that captured the attention of Swami Vivekananda. He, therefore, said, “There never was a time in the World’s history when there was so much robbery and high handedness and tyranny of the strong over the weak, as at this latter end of the nineteenth century.”

In the above analysis, it is clear that Vivekananda correctly diagnosed the degradation of India by the British rule. And, therefore, he wanted his countrymen to revive faith in themselves. According to Vivekananda, foreigners overpowered India because they had strong faith in themselves. He regretted about Indians lacking the same faith. Hence his approach was to regenerate India through the ideal of patriotism and nationalism steeped in spirituality.

As related to the feelings of patriotism, Vivekananda’s love for his motherland classifies him in the group of patriots as the best patriot. It does not suffice to say this. The birth of revolutionary ideas for the freedom movement are derived from Vivekananda’s spiritual ideal of India. Although Vivekananda was not interested in politics, but his ideas were wellspring for political reputation. India would have her political freedom in the near future.

The political condition as viewed by Vivekananda was gloomy. He was a critic of British Rule in India. He hated exploitation of the people and country’s

1 Vivekananda Vol 3 138-39
resources. And his ideas really were provocative in their nature. As Nenaimi Sadhana Bose puts it, “Whenever the police searched any home of revolutionaries or their hideouts, book by Vivekananda were found. Some extremists and revolutionaries called him the prophet of Nationalism, some hailed him as the Rousseau of India.” Thus revolutionary movement not only in Bengal, but also all over India deeply influenced and inspired people. The implication of Vivekananda’s message was to rebuild India with firmness of purpose, boldness of enterprise with deep concern for the sufferings of the people and reflects dedication to service. But there were all based on his mystical philosophy. To say briefly, he wanted to build Indian society mainly on its spirituality but not on politics.

Vivekananda was equally better critic of Indian Society. To his discriminative eye Indians were found lethargic and inactive. This is the deplorable state which Vivekananda could not tolerate in his countrymen. The reason he attributed to this state was that Indians did not have faith in themselves. Compared to the development in other countries, it was the faith as their source.

Another glaring defect to be seen in India was their quarrel. They fought among themselves. This quarrelsome attitude weakened them, the whole country looked weak owing to this defect. As Vivekananda puts it, “I must tell you that we are weak very weak. First of all is our physical weakness. The physical weakness is the cause of at least one-third of our miseries. We are lazy, we cannot work, we cannot combine, we do not love each others, we are intensely selfish, not

---


157
three of each other, without being jealous of each other. That is the state in which we are hopelessly disorganized mobs immensely selfish, fighting each other for centuries...”

After subtly pointing out this weakness, he makes mention of the various causes that have rendered Indian society weak. This he says in the following words: “Centuries and centuries, a thousand years of crushing tyranny of castes and kings and foreigners and your own people have taken out all your strength, my brethren, your backbone is broken, you are like downtrodden worms.”

The next moment Vivekananda’s mind contemplates over the method through which weaknesses can be removed. The one antidote for this ill is faith. But this faith should be understood in special way whenever he makes mention of it. It is that faith based on the strength of one’s own soul, which is divine in essence. Foreigners have unconsciously made use of this faith, believing in one’s potentiality. Therefore their strength lies in unwavering faith.

Vivekananda, next adopts a plan through which this dire malady can be overcome. He inculcates ancient method of mystical way, having faith in one’s own self, which is divine in essence. Therefore, he says, “Who will give strength? Let me tell you, strength, strength is what we want. And the first step-in getting is to uphold the Upanishads, and believe – “I am the soul”, “Me the sword cannot cut; nor weapon’s pierce; me the fire cannot burn; me the air cannot dry; I was the omniscient.” So repeat these blessed saving words. Do not say we are weak... Let

7 Vivekananda Vol.3 241-42.  
8 Vivekananda Vol.3 244.
us believe in it." So these are the words from Vedanta and Gita for the solution to the weakness. Mystical experience becomes supportive force of strength. This message of the strength is conveyed to people of all walks of life. Therefore he admonishes, "If the fisherman thinks that he is the spirit, he will be better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the spirit, he will be a better student. If the lawyer thinks that he is the spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on...

The above considerations of Swami Vivekananda shows that he lays much stress on physical as well as spiritual strength. But at the same time he feels that there cannot be spiritual without physical strength. Physical strength seems to be prerequisite for spiritual strength. Hence, the peroration, "First of all young men must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. Be strong my friends; that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita."

Another noticeable evil of India society which disturbed Vivekananda’s mind, was caste system in degenerate form. Vivekananda was very stern against the practice of untouchability. The priestly class, who practiced it becomes objective of his derision. The Shudra class was exploited in the name of caste superiority. They are ill-treated. Vivekananda, while traveling all over India, was deeply shocked to see with his own eyes that millions of people in India live on flowers of Mohoua plant and their blood is sucked by a million or two of sudhus and a hundred million or so Brahmans. He was convinced that grinding poverty is

9 Vivekananda Vol.3 244.
10 Vivekananda Vol.3 245.
11Vivekananda Vol.3 242.
the result of exploitation tyranny and oppression on the part of the priest craft and
the privileged classes of India. Therefore, Vivekananda says, “Priest craft is in its
nature cruel and heatless. That is why religion goes down where priest craft arises
says the Vedanta we must give up the idea of privilege, then will religion come.
Before that there is no religion at all.”

Privilege is the root cause of tyranny and

According to Vivekananda, has reduced the low caste people to the level

of professional beggars and has caused loss of manliness. And, again pointing to
the impact of tyranny. Vivekananda says, “That is why one-fifth of our people
have become Mohammedans. It was not the sword that did it all. It would be the
height of madness to think it was all the work of sword and fire. And one-fifth-
one-half of your Madras people will become Christians if you do not take care.”

It is all due to the effect of the tyranny of the priestly caste over low caste people.

After giving sufficient warning to the priestly and the privileged class,
Vivekananda recollects beneficial results of the British rule in India. On the
beneficial side, British rule in India destroyed exclusive privileges. Even
Mohammedan rule too had helped in that direction. What Vivekananda expects
from the priestly class is to work for the raising the standard of the low caste
people to the higher level. Brahmins are at advantage of cultural and intellectual
atmosphere. If this sole possession of intellectual property is to be shared with
low caste people, they too will have the same advantage.

Originally caste was meant for smooth working of society. It had
interdependent relationship with other activities in Society. The division of labour

\[12\] Vivekananda Vol.1 428.

\[13\] Vivekananda Vol.3 294.
is based on the competence of the participant. Thus individuals had their freedom to express their abilities freely. But the non-performance of the caste of an individual was prevented and the result was set back to one's growth. Vivekananda pinpointed India's downfall for not adhering idealized caste system.

From the above consideration, it becomes clear that the modern rigid caste system has set in because of the violation of the true spirit of caste system. Therefore what Vivekananda wants not the destruction of the old system of the caste, but a readjustment accordingly. In other words Vivekananda wants to put an end to caste quarrels. Therefore advice is given to Brahmins to spread cultural and intellectual atmosphere among low caste people. Thereby the Brahmins will raise the standard of the low caste people. Further, Vivekananda encourages the low caste people not to neglect the study of Sanskrit and spirituality so that they themselves can raise and the caste barriers is destroyed.

Vivekananda was aware of superior status of Sanskrit language and its relationship with cultural heritage. Therefore he speaks in all praise as, "Sanskrit and prestige go together in India. As soon as you have that, none dares say anything against you. That is the one secret; take that up."\(^{14}\) Vivekananda relies on the spirit of spirituality which will demolish all caste-barrier. He maintained that all men are equal and equally entitled to spiritual wisdom. Everyman should get his due. He upheld unity of all. And all as heir to spiritual wisdom. As S.S. Mittal puts, "Indeed, his theory of democratic spiritualism was a radical step."\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Vivekananda Vol.3 299.
Similarly neglected part in our Indian society along with low caste masses is women folk. Vivekananda has high respect for women folk. He quotes from Manu that the society will perish if the due respect is not shown to her. In the words of Vivekananda, "That constitution and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future." In the land of Vedanta, Vivekananda felt that there should not have been such discrimination between men and women. But in the outward nature, he accepts the distinction of sex. As S.S. Mittal observes Vivekananda’s attitude to women as, “Vivekananda had absolutely no hesitation in upholding the right of women to order their own affairs, though the help of sympathetic men from outside would be quite welcome. This followed naturally from his belief in the Vedantic doctrine of the sameness of the self everywhere.”

Vivekananda considered the role of women equally important in the building up superstructure of society. If the due attention is not paid to the development of women in society, there would be one-sided development. So the analogy of Vivekananda that a bird cannot fly with one wing, it needs two wings. The implication is that men and women must strive equally if the society is to progress.

Vivekananda was convinced that Indian women are capable of handling their own problems. In order to help them, he contemplates on education on modern lines. This education, he hoped, will enable them to have spiritual insight

16 Vivekananda Vol.7 215.
17 S.S. Mittal, 125.
in the end. Further, he thinks giving them modern science education to women, but not at the cost of ancient spirituality. From this consideration it becomes clear that he always at the best side of everything. Hence, he was against curbing of the liberty of women.

As for the consideration of marriage, Vivekananda upholds Indian ideal marriage system, as against Western, to perpetuate race. Marriage, according to him, is not given to sexual enjoyment. All the same, he was against child marriage. He felt that child marriages are arranged for the selfish gains of the parents and the relatives. Therefore he remarked, “I have strong hatred for child marriage... I would hate myself if I help such a diabolical customer directly, or indirectly.”¹⁸ As for the widow remarriage, he was non-committal in his attitude. S.S. Mittal observes, “… if they were given the proper education and being votary of freedom and a believer of spontaneous growth, he would leave them to decide for themselves.”¹⁹ However, Vivekananda does not favour divorce where wife is not tolerant with her husband, but asserts her independent nature. The golden mean to prescribes to them is the model of chaste woman Sita.

Vivekananda as a critic of society realized the importance of the role of education in the scheme of social regeneration. Vivekananda was completely dissatisfied with the modern education. And he was intensely conscious of the fact that the system of education introduced by the British was a vast baboo manufacturing machine. Therefore he complained the British system of education

¹⁸ Vivekananda Vol. 8 365.
¹⁹ S.S. Mital 129.
as, "What can you expect under foreign rule? The foreign conqueror is not there to do good to us; he wants his money. I studied hard for twelve years and become a graduate of Calcutta University; now I can scarcely make $5.00 a month in my county. Would you believe it? It is actually a fact, so these educational institutions of foreigners are simply to get a lot of useful, practical slaves for a little money – to turn out a host of clerks, post-masters, telegraph operators, and so on. There it is." The result of this system of education has not produced a genius worth mentioning.

The true education according to Vivekananda is a development of faculty. In mystical parlance the real education can be defined in his own words as, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man." Thus education, according to Vivekananda, is the growth from within and not a process of external conditioning. A teacher’s noble duty will be just to remove obstructions from the way. Vivekananda had firm conviction in the Vedantic theory. Therefore he said that all knowledge, whether secular or spiritual, is inherent in man. Vivekananda demands positive attitude in education.

In view of the positive attitude in education, Vivekananda said that there should not be much stress and strain while inculcating the facts. Education should be left to the free growth of an individual. Negative ideas like telling them that they would never learn anything or that they are fools will weaken them. Vivekananda stresses the need of secular and spiritual education. In other words

20 Vivekananda Vol. 8 69-70.
21 Vivekananda Vol. 4 358.

164
system of education must aim at providing opportunities for material prosperity at the lowest level and for self-realization at the highest level.

Next, he speaks of language barrier, if it is not his first language. As Vivekananda puts, "Therefore the ideas must be taught in the language of the people; at the same time Sanskrit education must go on along with it, because the very sound of Sanskrit words gives a prestige and power and a strength to the race."  

Vivekananda considers modern system of education purely intellectual; it is bereft of heart. And this intellectual education has not rendered men selfless. Vivekananda’s peroration of education was a regeneration of India through the upliftment of the masses and women. It was so because he was concerned with the development of the individual in society. Having the social concern, he was quite consistent with social interpretation of the Vedanta.

In conclusion, an observation can be made on Vivekananda’s outlook of social concern as a critic of society. He had comprehensive outlook towards all round development of society. He combined secular and spiritual aspects together. And he wanted total development of an individual physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually; and the development of society at large. That is what Vivekananda wanted. So he exhorted Indians to live up to the ideal to bring about the model society where material and spiritual forces were all well balanced.

The above social concerns of Swami Vivekananda proves him to be a critic of society.