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Swami Vivekananda and Social Change

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Abstract

We often wonder what would be the relevance of the message of a monk today, who was born more than 100 years ago, lived the life of a mendicant and left for his heavenly abode at a very young age of 39 years. In this paper, I would focus on the relevance of Swami Vivekananda philosophy of work in modern era. Swami Vivekananda taught on both broad and very deep aspects (not restricted to India alone) encompassing Spiritualism, Universal values, Religion, Character building, Education, Spirit of Service and Social issues. Teachings and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda stressed on different aspects of religion, youth, education, faith, character building as well as social issues pertaining to India. His teachings influenced contemporaries, inspired innumerable followers and started off movements all over India. Swami Vivekananda symbolizes courage, boundless energy and fiery enthusiasm. Millions have been influenced just by his personality. His words ring true and shake people out of their passivity, laziness, weakness, Inertia and sufferings. The ideas of Swami ji have been seen through various eyes and new light has been thrown upon these ideas.

Keywords- Struggle, Spiritualism, Philosophy, Ideology, Laziness, Superhuman

“We must do our duty for duty’s sake, not for the hope of reward...” (Works IV, pp. 191). Today, one keeps seeing and reading about the achievements of hundreds of young people in practically all spheres of life. But India is a land of tremendous contradictions. On one hand, one sees such enormous prosperity and wealth, while, on the other hand, one-third of Indians go without a second meal every day. Finding solutions to the complex social, economic, infrastructural, political and poverty-related problems is indeed a great challenge for India. This challenge needs enormous energy, a fresh perspective, a grandiose vision and superhuman efforts. Demographically, the India of today is at its youngest best. According to Swami Vivekananda, Youth is that wonderful time in life

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when energy is limitless, human creativity is at its best and the ‘never say die’ spirit is at its peak. It is also an impressionable age wherein we try to model our life against that of a ‘role model’ or ‘icon’. This is the time when one is ready to take on tasks however onerous they are; the time when our ideals can drive and determine one’s actions; the time when we believe that we can do anything under the sun. This is the time when we are easily motivated by the environment and by what we see and value around us. . Imagine the potential energy in these millions of young Indians and you can then fathom the fact that we could face any challenge as a Nation. The only qualification that Swamiji wanted our youth to have was this wonderful ability to ‘feel’. To those who wanted to go beyond just feeling and take to concrete action – he gave this potent mantra. These three words -Purity, Patience and Perseverance- are the qualities that every person desiring to do social work needs to possess. Purity means in thoughts, words and deeds. Patience to understand the dynamics of any community development activity and the fact that Society is always slow to understand and quick to label all such efforts. “Purity in thought, speech and act is absolutely necessary for anyone to be religious...” (Works III, pp. 48). One also needs great perseverance to work in the complex settings of Indian society. To attain any goal, one needs to have clear vision and thought process about it and the most importantly should know how to carry out the plans in order to complete the target. Vivekananda realized a country's future depends on its people, so he mainly stressed on man, "... man-making is my mission..."(Lokeswarananda ed., pp. 1-2), that's how he described his teachings. Swami Vivekananda put forth how to do our work—any sort of work. He presented it not only in the little book, Karma Yoga, but in many other places throughout his recorded Works. Sister Christina writes about him: "...his was no case of abstract and prepared dissertation. Every thought was passion, every word was faith. Every lecture was a torrential improvisation..." (Narasimhaiah, pp. 43). In this special Provisions supplement, we have collected most of these pieces of advice, which are classified into the following categories: general observations; our attitude towards the work itself; our conception of ourselves as workers; how to do our work; and our conception of our fellow workers.

Spiritual Change vis a vis Social Change

Swami Vivekananda was basically a spiritual master. So definitely he looked every change through the eye of spirituality. To him every change was but an effort to manifest the divine spiritual principle. It did not make any difference to him whether that divine principle was internal or external. To say in other words, whether it was manifestation of Atman as an individual divine principle or whether it was manifestation of Brahman, the cosmological divine principle vyashti or samashti principle, he always worked to bring about spiritual progress in individual and collective. To this end he has said,

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“All healthy social changes are manifestations of the spiritual forces working within and if these are strong and well adjusted, society will arrange itself accordingly. Each individual has to work out his own solution; there is no other way, and so also with nations. Again, the great institutions of every nation are the conditions of its very existence and cannot be transformed by the mould of any other race. Until higher institutions have been evolved, any attempt to break the old ones will be disastrous. Growth is always gradual.”

What does have our scriptures to say on the topic? While they are profuse about the spiritual development of a person, they are mum or say very little about the collective social development. A question therefore arises, are they really silent because social development is impossible or is it because they were less interested in it. We sincerely think and hope that it is the latter which is true. The ancient scripture had their eyes fixed on the individual's spiritual development and gave little thought to social development. Yet there were efforts to keep society in check too. We find in the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata that lot of thought was put into well-being of society and what would be the duties of each and every person. Same goes with various Smritis.

However, without a grain of any doubt whatsoever, our scriptures advocated and eulogized individual's spiritual development. And on the other hand if we search for reasons for the advocacy of social development we are left with a want. However, if we dig a little deeper, it stands to reason, that the scriptures are not against social development and to some extent they do advocate social development, if Smritis are the gauge by which we measure.

The Philosophy of Change

Though it may seem absurd on the face, there are people with convoluted thinking who say that we should not work for the betterment of world as the world is going to remain the same. Some of them go as far as pointing out that it is equally futile to work for our betterment as we will get what fate has in store for us. This is law of fate at work in opposition to law of karma. This is a very strange idea difficult for a man who has had a secular upbringing or who has an open mindset to digest. The traditional interpreters of Vedanta and also the proponents of Bhakti have all likened the world to a curly tail as in the story of curly tail of a dog and djinn

The story goes like this. Once a disciple of a famed guru came to know that all one's problems are solved if one possesses a djinn. He knew that his guru had mastered the method of taking possession of djinns, so he went to his guru and implored that he teach him how to possess a djinn. Initially the guru was reluctant but when the disciple pestered on continuously he gave up and taught the disciple a method to possess a djinn. But as a final warning he told the disciple to be extremely cautious because the djinns are tricky and dangerous creatures.

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However, the disciple was very happy and immediately set about possessing a djinn. The process taught by his guru was genuine and in a matter of few months, his efforts bore fruit and a djinn appeared before him. The djinn bellowed, "O, my master, I am bound to fulfill every wish of yours, and you are to keep me busy all the time. If I become free of work and you fail to give me another work I will devour you." "No matter", the disciple thought, "I have so much work, that I can keep the djinn busy for ages" "Toil in my fields, sow the crops and work till the harvest is done." he ordered the djinn, but no sooner the words have escaped his mouth, the ground was tilled, the seed sown, watered, sprouted, grew into crops and harvested. All this in a moment's notice. The disciple was awestruck, but he kept his wits and ordered next, "Build me a palace with seven floors, with big gardens all around." "Done!" was the answer he got from djinn.

Now the disciple was afraid. Whatever work he gave to the djinn it was finished in a jiffy. And immediately after finishing the work, the djinn would be at the head of disciple threatening to eat him. The disciple was in a quandary. "Wait", he said, "Take me to my guru." The djinn flew him to his guru. The disciple fell at the feet of the guru and hurriedly told him the whole story of happenings while the djinn was still at his heels. The guru smiled and told the djinn to bring a really curly tail of a dog. When the djinn brought the curly tail the guru asked the djinn to make that curly tail straight. The djinn straightened the curly tail but as soon as he let it go, the tail would curl up again. The djinn struggled with it for a long time but the matters remained same. Tired, he said to guru that he had served many a master in the past yet he was never given such a hard task before and told him that if he let him go he will never trouble the disciple again. The story is an anecdote to the fact that the world is like a curly tail of dog and no one can ever straighten it up. It is equally futile to work to make the world perfect.

But the opposite idea is also there in scriptures. Krishna has said that in time there will be as many Krishnas as there are grapes in a grape vine. It points to the fact that in future there will be abundance of avatars and everyone will be free. If this does not mark the epitome of the perfection of a society definitely then what else will.

The same idea is conveyed by the idea of Mahapralaya in puranas. A Kalpa is the time period which is a single day of Brahma, and pralaya is his night. When the Brahma changes, everything returns to the essence of Brahman, and everything starts anew. This is the time when it is said that every living being is freed. If that is not so, then one may indeed ask what is the difference between pralaya and mahapralaya except for the fact that Brahma is changed.

The scriptures do not say that society is unchangeable. Instead, on the contrary, the society, and the world is constantly changing as opposed to the unchangeable supreme reality of

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Brahman/Atman. Change is the name of world. So sometimes some change is for the good of the world and sometimes it is for the worse.

Way to change

To consider ways to change the society we have to look at the constituents of the society. After all what is the society? Society is a collection of individuals. If each one changes himself then the change is achieved. This is often quoted but seldom practiced dictum. The reason is clear. All want only others to change. That is why in the beginning it was mentioned, when one wants change, what one really wants is that people and circumstances around one should change whereas one remains unchanged. But we need something more than just an idea. Swami Vivekananda had concrete advice too.

Sitting on the last bit of rock in the Indian ocean, Swami Vivekananda had a vision. He saw the problems of India and the solution. Though he did not mention the solution directly, the readers of literature of Swami Vivekananda are of the belief that what he saw as the solution was two-fold—One the spiritual upheaval of the country and second the wide spread education of masses. In many of his lectures also he pointed out that first is the need of education. If we give education to any section of the society then we need not do anything else. They will solve their own problems and raise themselves. He said later on—“Oh, we are awfully poor, and our masses are very ignorant about secular things. Our masses are very good because poverty here is not a crime. Our masses are not violent. ... We have to give them secular education. We have to follow the plan laid down by our ancestors, that is, to bring all the ideals slowly down among the masses. Raise them slowly up, raise them to equality. Impart even secular knowledge through religion.

There is a talk of value education in the academic circles. There is a general need to bring value education in the ambit of secular teaching. Ways are being thought of and tried to be implemented to bring value education in the mainstream curricula of schools and educational institutes.

But the question is how to teach character. It is my belief that character cannot be taught in classes. Character can only be built by examples. In other words, it can only be taught by oneself living a life of character. Only if the teacher is of good character will a child imbibe good character. If a child sees his or her elders indulging in vices and at the same time insisting that he or she be of good character then this is not going to help. The change in individuals mind can only be brought by leaders who lead by life: only those who preach what they practise. In secular education, for example, it hardly matters if the teacher of secular subjects, be it art, science or humanities, is of highest character. But this is not so if we want to teach secular education tinged with character making and spiritual well being. During the education of a person, throughout his/her childhood, and even

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throughout his/her adolescence, it should be done by people who are of impeccable character and high spiritual calibre.

Swamiji enhanced Indian prestige all over world

Swamiji enhanced Indian prestige in the world through his speeches at the world parliament of Religion held in Chicago in 1893 and his subsequent work in America and Mandal 3 Quest: Multidisciplinary Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences Volume 1 Issue 1 (July-Sep. 2014) Article No. 6 England. Swamiji showed the universal relevance and significance of Indians ancient philosophy and spiritual culture in solving many of the problems associated with modern living. He enabled thousands of people in the west to appreciate Indian philosophy and culture. 2. 6.

Socio Economic Change through education

Swami Vivekananda did not believe in abrupt changes in society. He believed that socio economic change can be brought about through education. He wanted both moral and secular education to be imparted to the common man of this country. He established the Ramkrishna Mission in 1897 to what he described as creating “machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest” (CWSV II 171). Swamiji laid the foundation for harmony amongst religions and also harmony between religion and science. His Guru’s message of harmony of religion: “Yato Mat Tato Path” (As many faiths, so many paths).

Vivekananda’s conviction for youth

Vivekananda had a firm conviction that for the youth, life is larger than livelihood. Their aim is to break the shackles of the established society to revolt against whatever breeds inequality, injustice, bondage of mind and all kinds of backwardness. Vivekananda welcomed the youth to come forward and join in the struggle for achieving freedom of all kinds, political, economic and spiritual. He felt that because the youth had no possession, they could be sincere and dedicated souls. They can sacrifice everything for a noble cause. Vivekananda said, “My faith is in the younger generation, the modern generation, out of them will come my workers, they will work out the whole problem like lions.”

History supports the conviction of Vivekananda. The Sedition Committee Report prepared by the British Government shows that of the revolutionaries who took part in the struggle for freedom during the Swadeshi days, 85% belong to the age group 16-30. Coming to recent events we see that it was the youth community which took leadership in the student revolt in France, around 1968 in the cultural revolution in China, in lodging protest against the Vietnam War waged by America, War of Liberation in Bangladesh, the Naxalite Movement in Bengal and similar other movements.

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