

Philosophical Ideas of Swami Vivekananda: Culture, the Psychological Cultivation of the Mind

Seema Arora*

Abstract

Man consists of two factors, the mind and the body. Mind with its perception is said to be directly opposed to, though somehow or other familiarly connected with, the body with its extension for, the mind has no expansion, and the body, consciousness. Now, the consciousness of mind assumes the form of reason in man, while consciousness is the common property of all living beings. Hence, the prominent yet often criticized definition of man is that he is a rational animal. In this way, man has two sides—a higher coherent side; a lesser animal one. A perfect man is he who can work out a perfect synthesis between these two sides of his nature with, of course, the higher controlling the lower, as natural and beneficial. A perfect society also, therefore, is one in which there is such a perfect synthesis between spiritualism and materialism, with, of course, the earlier scheming the latter, as predictable and essential. Society is of course, a celestial institution. Still, from the practical point of view, its internal divinity, real nature, has to be manifested. Moreover, it is essential to remember that truth must be manifested rather than constructed. As a matter of fact, Truth, real Truth cannot be contrived at all at will; it can be only manifested through wisdom and good sense. Vivekananda's concept of society, though derived from Vedantik philosophy, seeks to integrate both the spiritualistic and worldly interpretations of both man and society; it is both individualistic and socialistic. Believing in the divine nature of man, Vivekananda seeks to establish a continuum between society, culture and civilization, like the wick, oil and the flame. This approximates the essential view of both man and society.

Keywords: Divine, manifest, consciousness, spiritualism, materialism

INTRODUCTION

Vivekananda had an intimate knowledge of the western civilization as well as of the Indian culture based on spirituality. On the basis of this intense knowledge, he developed an insight into the future of Indian polity. Vivekananda is of the view that two attempts have been made in the world to found social life. The one was upon religion or spirituality, and the other was upon social requirement or materialism or pragmatism. The one looks outside the horizon of the little substance world. While the other is satisfied to stand on things of the world and expects to find a firm footing there. Referring to Western and Eastern society, he observed that the West is groaning under the tyranny of the Shylocks, and the

East is groaning under the tyranny of the priests, each must keep the other in check. Do not think that one unaccompanied is to assist the world. Vivekananda clearly acknowledges the importance of both spiritualism and materialism, as well as idealism and realism. Both are harmonizing to each other. Vivekananda is quite familiar with the West's materialistic approach to life. So, he warns the West to make spirituality the basis of his life. He is of the view that the whole Western civilization will disintegrate to pieces in the next fifty years if there is no spiritual establishment.

*Author for Correspondence

Seema Arora

E-mail: principal.ctihs@ctgroup.in

Principal, Department of Architecture, C T Institute of Higher Studies, Shahpur, Jalandhar, Punjab, India

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Culture: The Psychological Cultivation of the Mind

Culture is the psychological development of the mind, which yields ethics that preside over human behavior and human associations. Thus, culture is the culturing or cultivation of human mind. It is that psychological process of mental organization by which the fundamental, innate, inherited elements of the mind are built round objects and persons. Vivekananda has pointed out the difference between culture and civilization and their relationship with knowledge. He says, "It is culture that withstands shocks, not an easy mass of information [1]." From this statement, it logically follows that a nation may have a large reservoir of knowledge but no culture because, in spite of knowledge as Vivekananda points out, "they are like tigers; they are like savages, because culture is not there [2]."

Vivekananda Further Pointed Out

Acquaintance is only skin-deep as civilization is, and a little scratch brings out the old savage [3].

That is why Vivekananda emphasizes time and again that Indian masses should develop and reinforce. He feels, "To the Brahmans I appeal that they must work hard to raise the Indian people by giving out the culture that they accumulated for centuries [2]." Vivekananda persuasively remarked, "Everything goes to show that Maoism or some form of rule by the people, call it what you will, is coming on the boards [2]." At another place, he again remarked:

However, there will come a time when the Shudra class will rise to prominence with their inherent nature and identity. Unlike the present, when they are not seen in this role, this future era will see the Shudras achieving prominence in society by staying true to their own Shudra identity, rather than adopting the qualities of the Vaisyas or Ksatriyas [4].

He pointed out that the Shudras had worked so long uniformly like apparatus guided by human astuteness and the clever educated segment had taken the considerable part of the fruit of their labor. He said:

They have no chance; no flee, no way to climb up. They float lower every day; they feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society and they do not recognize whence the blow comes. They have elapsed that they too are men [5].

But the day was not far off when they would attain power and establish their own supremacy and be rulers.

Vivekananda argued that whether the headship of society is in the hands of those who control learning or acquiesce the authority of riches or arms, the source of its power is always the subject masses. They are the vertebral column of the country because they produce all wealth and food. They will certainly want the contentment of their objectives, needs, less work, no repression, no war, and more food. The present system of allocation of prosperity makes the poor shoddier and the rich wealthier.

Vivekananda held that not only were the upper classes of India responsible for exploiting the poor masses but also they helped the British imperialism in strengthening the foundation of a foreign political and economic system because that system; in its turn, permitted them to practice oppression on their less fortunate brethren. He poured forth all his censored venom and deep antipathy alongside these so-called upper classes in the subsequent wonderful words:

You, the higher classes of India, do you think you are alive? It is among those whom your associates abhorrent as 'walking carrion', that the little of vivacity there is still in India is to be found; and it is you who are the real 'walking Corpses'. You combine yourselves in the null and void and fade away and let 'New India' arise in your place [5].

Thus, Vivekananda castigates the upper classes for their exploitative tendencies and snobbery. He lionizes the downtrodden who have the potential to expedite the emergence of 'New India.' He asserts:

Let her arise-out of the peasant's cottage, materialistic the plough. Let her spring from the grocer's shop, from at the side of the oven of the fritter-seller. Let her originate from the factory from marts; and from markets. Let her emerge from groves; and forests from hills and mountains [6].

To Vivekananda, the Indian social order represents the essence of the immense, all-encompassing motherhood; the lower classes, including the ignorant, the poor, the cobbler, and the sweeper, are its very foundation. The sweeper are its flesh and blood [7].” And his exhortation was, “Serve as worship of the Lord Himself in the poor, the miserable, the weak [8].” Mounting the idea auxiliary, he says, “rich men are merely the ornaments, the garland of the country. It is the millions of poor lower-class people who are its life. The only hope of India is from the masses. The upper classes are mentally and morally dead [9].”

These observations convincingly revealed that Vivekananda earnestly and passionately felt that the renascent India would be based on the solid foundations of the “common people.” Hence he insisted for giving all amenities to the poor. He said, “If the Brahmin has more propensity for erudition on the position of genetics than the Pariah, spend no more money on the Brahmin's edification; but expend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for it is where the gift is most needed. Our poor people, these down-trodden masses of India, therefore, require to hear and to know what they really are [10].”

To Vivekananda, socialism was only a means and not an end in itself. The present situation of India was the effect, and the cause lay in the tyranny of the upper classes. Hence, he suggested that it was the duty of the upper classes to suck up their own poison and help the poor by giving them culture. Hence, he believed that the cause must be removed; the effect would automatically be wiped out. The modern trend seemed to believe that socialism could be imposed on the people, but this approach was contrary to the principle of growth or evolutionary process. A Maoist state or society could not be manufactured over-night. Society was an organism not a machine. It must grow. Gandhi is of the same view that a new social order cannot be enforced that would be a remedy shoddier than the ailment.

Why did Vivekananda place all his hopes on the poor toiling millions? Was it because they constituted the overwhelming majority of the nation? It was not the only reason. They were toilers; they created all the wealth of society. They were deprived of what they produced for long. But when this alienation reached its limit, then, by the very laws of development of society, the deprived, deprived the depriver, the expropriator was expropriated. Unlike western socialists he neither believed in the elimination of private enterprise, nor in the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production to prevent mistreatment of the poor by the rich in the society. His loom to the resolution of social and supporting troubles was moral and not economic.

Unlike communists and the syndicalists, Vivekananda did not believe in using violent and revolutionary methods for the quick overthrow of the capitalist system. He insisted that permanent results could never be achieved through this method because there was no end to violence and hatred. As we could not squeeze oil from sand so, peace could never be achieved through violence. Hence, this method could never be accepted as the permanent basis of peace. The only method for achieving harmony and peace in society was the method of 'love' and persuasion.

Vivekananda's conception of an ideal society was a society in which diversity of competence and occupation would remain, but in which prospect would be entirely unknown. All this requisite a root-and-branch change, but he assumed that such reorganization could not come through a upheaval based on force. It could be ushered in only through progression based on culture and shared esteem. Thus his motto was, “From caste to socialism through culture [11].”

Vivekananda did not think that socialism was a perfect system and that it would cure all parochialism by liberating the masses and diverting their attention to more active cooperation in the fields of industry and commerce. In his opinion, the economic approach to socialism would not do much. It should not be divorced from culture. Hence he put emphasis on cultural equality and advocated evolution and not revolution. According to Vivekananda, true approach to the solution of social problems lay in following the path of progressive reduction of inequalities. While making it clear that manipulation in the physical world however, clever could not lead to an ultimate solution of human problems, he advocated socialism of the 'leveling-up' variety, and not that of the 'leveling-down' variety. Unfortunately, we saw that many misguided fanatics more readily took to the 'levelling-down' type. On the other hand, Vivekananda's 'socialism' did not require pulling down those at the top and equalizing them with those at the bottom, but helping the least and the lowest to rise higher and higher till all were equal at the top.

Vivekananda was fully prone that the peasant, the shoe-maker, the sweeper, and such other lower classes of India had much greater aptitude for work and self-sufficiency than upper classes. Addressing the upper classes, he again said, "Very soon they will get above you in position, you have so long oppressed these long-suffering masses; now is the time for their reprisal [12]."

Vivekananda Warned them that his Teachings had been Misrepresented in Every Country

The lower classes are gradually arousing to this fact and making a unified front against this, determined to exact their justifiable dues. The masses of Europe and America have been the first to awaken and have already begun the fight. Signs of this arousing have shown themselves in India too, as is evident from the number of strikes among the lower classes nowadays. The upper classes will no longer be able to oppress the lower classes, no matter how hard they try [12].

Vivekananda fully realized that it was labor that created all wealth, and it was these very creators who were deprived of the fruits of their labor. From this, it could be securely concluded that he was among the very few Indians of his time who understood the social consequence of labor. On the other hand, he was convinced that if proper atmosphere and opportunity were given to the toilers, they would be capable of the highest intellectual activity. He remarked that a number of geniuses are sure to arise from among them. He was quite confident unless this wide chasm between the lower and the upper classes was made up, there was no hope for any well-being for the people, in spite of his sympathy for the poor and contempt for the upper classes he laid ultimate emphasis on spirituality. He once described his ideal as teaching humanity about spirituality and demonstrating how to manifest it in every moment of life.

CONCLUSION

Vivekananda's socialism, even if brought about, without this spiritual uplift, would not last. He is of the view that any culture will last unless it is based on religion, on the goodness of man. His stand was that though the people had to be fed and their standard of living had to be raised, this was not to be achieved at the cost of religious besides, he found no incompatibility between social progress and spiritual advancement. He wanted the masses to rise with their spiritual heritage intact. He asserts that they retain their innate religious life while shedding their lost eccentricity. His aphorism was distance from the ground of the masses without injuring their religion. He was firmly convinced that religion could play an active role in uplifting the masses. So according to Vivekananda, whether it concerned wealth or possessions, social positions or educational opportunities, the temptation to pull down and equalize, the temptation to seek hasty short-cuts, must be resisted. And an honest, intense desire to uplift others to the 'top' must be backed up by appropriate action, 'calm, silent and steady work'. A prime necessity was to discourage jealousy towards those who were better placed and more gifted than us, and the reprehensible attitude of grabbing others honest earnings, through force or political scheming and legal tricks. It was difficult to say how Vivekananda arrived at this conclusion. May be, his first-hand knowledge of the condition of the exploited masses of India, of the deprivation of the native princes, his contact with the most advanced western societies and their social thinking led him logically to this

conclusion. Vivekananda laid stress on the change of attitudes of the masses and upper classes. Strife would not help either; it would degrade both. The lower classes would not rise by leveling down upper classes; their real destiny lay in raising themselves up spiritually and culturally. It was no use simply blaming others; they had to exert themselves and imbibe the qualities that made others great.

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