



Marx and Vivekananda on Socialism

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Some great men shake the world; others shape the world. Rarely do personalities emerge who shake and shape the world. Marx was universal and he effected human progress everywhere. Vivekananda burst on the world's Parliament of Religion at Chicago and addressed his message of humanism. Both Marx and Vivekananda was lover of humanity and opposed to social injustice. Let us have a closer look on the social justice as explained by Marx and Vivekananda.

Karl Marx and Swami Vivekananda were two outstanding personalities who influenced human thought in a very significant manner during the 19th Century. Marx was born in 1818 and died in 1883; Vivekananda, born in 1863, died in 1902. Though they were contemporaries for 20 years, they did not know each other personally nor did they directly influence each other.

To understand their viewpoint, we have to analyze the time in which they lived. The nineteenth century was critical period in the history of human civilization, when four powerful strands had coalesced producing a profound impact on the course of humanity's onward march. These were capitalism, science and technology, industrialization and imperialism. Every corner of the world was affected by its irresistible impact.

The salient characteristics of this age have been brought out by C.L. Wayper thus : "The age — was one of great physical and technological achievements. Marx was almost lyrical in his enthusiasm for its technical perfection He writes in communist Manifesto, '..... subjection of nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigates, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground.... 'what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour? It was an age that was becoming increasingly rationalist and materialist, an age which, at once valued technical achievement and confidently anticipated that such achievement would become bigger and better. It was an age in which the products of technical achievements were very unevenly spread; an age of growing wealth for many and, so it seemed, of increasing misery for more. It was an age in which religion was no longer exercising its former appeal and the world had grown colder in consequences. It was an age in which civilization was not as impressive as technical achievement An age then, of achievement and suffering, of strident scientific assurance and fading religious faith, of apparent fulfillment and of a great and growing



emptiness, an age of which it could be said, as Milton said of his time:¹⁶ 'The hungry sheep look up and are not fed'— this was the age in which Marx lived.

At the beginning of 19th century, Germany or rather Russia was in a state of turmoil. The slogan of French Revolution was liberty, equality and fraternity. This became wildfire all over Europe. The Napoleonic wars had created and strengthened sentiments of patriotism and nationalism in every part of Europe. The powers of hereditary monarch were declined. The Industrial and mercantile middleclass gained strength. A new class of proletariat arose out of Industrialism. This has disrupted and displaced the centuries old feudal relationship. The university of Bonn and Berlin became the nerve centre for secular and scientific learning and this has given rise to new class of scholars, philosophers, writers and scientist. Peoples feelings and ideas were reflected on various publication of periodicals. Revolutionary and seditious propaganda gained momentum. It was in this period of ferment, challenges, revolt, repression and eager expectations of a radically new world that Karl Marx was born in Trier in 1818.

The social, political, economic, religious and psychological situation in India was in all round ferment at the time of Swami Vivekananda.

India lay prostrate at the feet of the foreign conqueror. As Swami Ranganathananda has put it, "His (Swami Vivekananda's) life coincided with the most dynamic period of modern transition in India, which resulted from the contact of the age-old Indian culture and tradition with the youthful cultures of the modern west. Out of that ferment arose modern Indian renaissance which had already proceeded with uncertain steps for more than half a century by the time Vivekananda

appeared on the scene and which found him the most effective representative and exponent."

Indian's religion, culture, philosophy, social system, in short, everything, become objects of challenge. Sardar K.M.Panicker described the 19th century as one of the three determining periods in Indian History. "The issue raised in this period was the confrontation of the superior, expanding and highly dynamic civilizations, with an old static and, as it appeared, decaying culture..... The Hindu society was thus confronted with a dynamic civilization, which was convinced not only of its own incomparable moral greatness, economic strength, technological and scientific superiority but was moved by a firm belief that the form of life it represented was the final one to which all others must conform. This was in some way a graver challenge than the two previous ones. If she failed, to meet it, the danger was not that Hinduism might disappear, as in the 14th century, but that Indians, as people might, for all times, fall back in the race for progress and be reduced to a position of a semi-civilized, ineffective people with no contribution to make to the world. The philosophies of ancient India might be studied by the curious and the scholarly as the ideas of ancient Egyptians are studied today". He continues: "In the last quarter of the 19th century, this dangerous tendency was checked by the emergence of an outstanding all-India leader Swami Vivekananda."

So, both Marx and Vivekananda were towering personalities, inspired by a burning passion and steeled by firm determination to transform the society around them. They exerted a direct impact on the contemporary society.

The sharp distinction between the Marxist idea of world transformation and that of the Hindus has been brought out by Dr.



Radhakrishnan. ‘In its concern for the poor and the lowly, in its demand for a more equitable distribution of wealth an opportunity, in its insistence on rational equality, it gives us a social message with which all idealists are in agreement. But our sympathy for the social programme does not necessarily commit us to the Marxist philosophy of life, its authentic conception of ultimate reality, its naturalistic view of a man and its disregard of the sacredness of personality’.

“The chief elements of the Marxian creed”, says Radhakrishnan, are the theory of value which describes the methods by which the workers are exploited by the capitalists, the hypothesis of dialectical materialism, the economic interpretation of history, the class theory of progress and a defense of revolution as the method by which the workers are to attain power.”

The cornerstone on which the entire Marxist philosophy is built up is ‘dialectical materialism’. The materialism that Marx expounded is known as dialectical materialism, because in it, “materialism and dialectics are indissolubly interconnected. Marxist dialectics examines the world in constant motion, change and development.

Marx applied the dialectics to the material development of society. The human society too has evolved from primitive communism, through slavery and feudalism, into capitalism through their process of dialectics, which Marx describes by the term ‘Class Struggle’. Under capitalism there are two classes, the capitalists and the working class. Class war between these two is inevitable and inherent. Out of that will emerge a new synthesis-socialism.

Dr. Radhakrishnan points out, ‘The socialist programme of the Marxist is more

adequate to the real needs of mankind and to the exigencies of production by modern technical means. The demand of socialism is a moral demand. This theory appeals by its very simplicity, and its plausibility is increased by the facts that economic phenomena are of great importance in life and history — The emphasis on the importance of economic conditions is correct; the suggestion that they are exclusively determinant of history is incorrect—. If economic forces condition historic evolution, it does not follow that other forces do not. The forces of economic necessity and religious idealism may interact and mould the future history.

Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy is based on Vedanta. The Vedantic approach is very comprehensive and takes into account the fact that truth, though essentially one, is perceived differently. There are three board different levels of perception – *dvaita*, *visishta duaita* and *Advaita*. Vikekananda’s philosophy is diametrically opposed to that of Marx. Marx believes the fundamental reality consists of matter, whereas according to Vivekananda, it is spirit.

A.V. Rathna Reddy says in his book, ‘The political philosophy of Vivekananda’ that the Swami believed that ‘the social evolution is not different from the evolution of the universe. The law of universe operates in society also. As the universe is not static but dynamic, no institution in society is sacred and eternal. The social evolution is based on the principle of rise and fall.’

The Swamiji’s concept of process of social evolution is that “materialism and spirituality prevail alternatively in society. Civilization means manifestation of spirituality. When people are enmeshed in materialism, in sensuous pleasure, their creativity does not manifest, their latest capacities lie in the dormant condition and thus



takes place a gradual degradation of culture. But when spirituality ascends, the dormant creativity is let loose, leaving its stamp everywhere, in arts and crafts, in thoughts and deeds, in organization. In this period, the barrier of privileges breaks down as no one claims exclusive powers and greater harmony and peace exists in society.”

Swamiji does not believe in conflict or class war as the mechanism for social evolution. He said, ‘you must take care not to setup class strife between the poor peasants, the laboring people and the wealthy classes’. Swamiji believes that economic advancement is a necessary precondition to spiritual fulfillment, as much for individual as for the society.

Swami Tapasyananda in his book ‘Legacy of Swami Vivekananda’, says: “what he longed for was not an endless pursuit, as in many so called advanced countries of today, of higher and higher standards of living and sophistication of life pattern, but the provision of the minimum requirements for healthy and contented life, which along can provide man with the leisure and reserve of mental energy required for the pursuit of spiritual values.

An environment neither of extreme enjoyment nor of base indulgence and misery can generate ‘vairagya’ or revulsion and non-attachment to the fleeting worldly values. Only a via media in the social and the economic situation can foster “vivek” discrimination-the parent of renunciation and spiritual aspiration and thus favour the rise of impressive men of spiritual genius who can deliver the saving gospel, the message of India to the young and powerful nations of the world”.

Swamiji witnessed terrible misery, the crippling poverty, the paralyzing slavery and the inhuman exploitation of the masses, the hypocrisy

and priestcraft in India and all these made him to look up the philosophy of socialism as a probable ray of hope, if not as permanent sunshine. He had explained say he turned towards socialism.

“The other systems have been tried and found wanting. Let this be tried — if for nothing else, for the novelty of the thing. A distribution of pain and pleasure is better than always the same persons having pains and pleasures. His attitude to socialism, as he summed up, “I am a socialist, not because it is a perfect system, but because I believe that half a loaf is better than no bread.” Whereas Marx gave unqualified support to socialism.

While Marx’s socialism was essentially materialistic in concept, Vivekananda never subscribed to such a brand. As V.K.R. V.Rao puts it, “the engine of social changes must have its proper fuel; and this according to Vivekananda, could only come from spirituality and the Vedanta, which proclaimed the innate divinity in man and the sameness it gave all men as the basis for social ethics of non-exploitation and universal human welfare.”

Swami Vivekananda believed religion (and not politics) as the path of change whereas Marx believed that religion was the opiate of mankind and that it must be done away within the interest of human welfare. Vivekananda’s socialism was no way antithetical to religion. His standpoint has been explained by Swami Gambhirananda thus; ‘Though the people had to be fed and their standard of living to be raised, this was not to be achieved at the cost of religion’.

Besides, he found no incompatibility between social progress and spiritual advancement. He wanted the masses to rise with their spiritual intact. ‘Can you give them(the



masses) their lost individuality without making them lose their innate spiritual nature?- he used to ask. His motto was elevation of the masses without enfacing their religion. Vivekananda tells us that, of all the forces that have worked, are still working, to mould the destiny of human race, non certainly is more potent than the manifestation of which we call religion. Everything goes to show that socialism or some form of rules people will certainly want the satisfaction of their material needs, less work, no oppression, no war, more food. What guarantee have we that this, or any civilization, will last unless it is based on religion, on the goodness of the man? Religion goes to the roots of the matter. If it is right, all is right. Socialism, as conceived today is a product of materialism, but the present crisis is not merely in the outside world, but also in the soul of man, and it can be resolved only by religion which raises man to the divine state.”

Another difference between Swami Vivekananda and Marx is in their concept of socialism. According to Vivekananda, 'Freedom is the only condition of growth; take that off, the result is degeneration.' “He lays emphatic stress on the growth of the individual where as Marx lays the entire stress on centralized society or cumulative life. But the ideal social life cannot be achieved if the individual has to sacrifice his soul or individual existence.”

Probably the basic difference between the socialism as envisaged by Marx and that by Vivekananda, is that the latter has built his concept on Advaita Vedanta, whereas Marx had materialistic sustain. But both Marx and Vivekananda has intense concern for the toiling masses. Marx saw to what depth of degradation, the working class, whom he called the proletariat,

was reduced as a result of capitalist exploitation. Marx also knew that of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeois today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class”.

Both Marx and Vivekananda find the intense concern for the welfare of the humanity but both of them saw ‘Man’ in different lights. For both Marx and Vivekananda, the world was their arena, and humanity, the object of their service. But while Vivekananda choose Advaitya Vedanta for bringing social justice to millions of Indians and humanity, Marx approached dialectical materialism and proletariat revolution to ameliorate the ills of mankind.

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