



Vivekananda : The Humanist

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Humanism is an attitude of mind attaching prime importance to man and human values are often regarded as the central theme of Renaissance civilisation. In recent years the term 'humanism' has often been used to refer to a value system that emphasises the personal worth of each individual.¹

Swami Vivekananda – monk, guru, disciple, Vedantist, prophet, patriot, mystic and above all a great humanist – can be better understood and realised as a universal phenomenon. He often appeared to many as one of irreconcilable thoughts – 'a living paradox.' Yet beneath the exterior lay his deep humanism that shaped a stellar spiritual life. Religion was no longer regarded by him to be an uncompromising set of mere orthodox rites and rituals, but was accepted to be simpler guidelines to be followed by the common people in day to day life. He was by no means the first to declare man divine, but was first in modern India to mean it from the innermost sinew of his hands and brain and to work it out on a large scale.²



No wonder he was given the popular acronym 'wandering monk' because he visited the nook and corner of India and also abroad not merely to satiate his irresistible wander thirst but to see face to face the ever degrading status of human beings. He meditated on a huge rock at Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula. He was no run-of-the-mill priest who sat motionless and meditated upon an incomprehensible formless presence or any other god sitting above. But his deep concern was for the man below toiling on the soil and leading a life of zestless drudgery and how to restore to him his dignity and glory as man, as a child of immortal bliss – *amrutasya putra* – as the Indian sages had realised the truth about man.³ To quote Swamiji.

"My idea is to bring to the door of the meanest, the poorest, the noble ideas that the human race has developed both in and out of India and let them think for themselves. Whether there should be caste or creed, whether women should be



perfectly free or not, does not concern me. Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, of growth and well-being. Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down.⁴

Vivekananda used a term coined by Sir Julian Huxley as the core of his thoughts on humanism – the science of human possibilities.⁵ Biologist Huxley had coined this phrase to express what he wanted modern western science to develop into.

However, Vivekananda's core idea of humanism owes its roots to *adhyatma vidya* (the philosophy of man in depth). His ideas appear to have affinity with *Kathopanishad* (3.12):

*Esha sarbeshu bhuteshu
gudha atma na prakashate
Drishyate tvagryaya buddhya
sukhmaya sukhma – darshabhih.*

(Soul or *atma* [infinite] is present in everything in a hidden form and therefore is not manifested; but it can be realised by the subtle and penetrating reason of the person who is trained to perceive the subtlest of the subtle truth.)

Thus, Swamiji's concept of humanism bears a unique stamp of individual power and potentiality. It is 'intensely human, even supra-human.' It cannot be equalled with the prevalent idea of humanism in the West or with the scientific humanism. It is altogether a different form which is strengthened and sustained by the ignition of divine spark in man as supported by Vedantic thought. There is the benign touch of universality and dynamism in this form where energies are entirely positive. It abhors the concept of any negative energies or vibes. This is the strength and relevance of Vivekananda's Vedantic humanism, echoed in present day Biology as psycho-social evolution – of evolution rising from the organic level to the ethical and moral levels.⁶

In his scheme of Vedantic humanism, education plays a vital part which is 'the training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful.'⁷ These possibilities can be broadly categorised under three heads:

- (i) *Sila* (physical aspect),
- (ii) *Chitta* (mental aspect) and
- (iii) *Prajna* (intellectual pursuit or divine possibilities).

The third is the highest growth that includes the fullness of human development. To quote Swamiji himself:

What is the individuality of man? Not Tom Brown, but God in man. This is the [true] individuality. The more man has approached that, the more he has given up his false individuality. The more he tries to collect and gain everything (for himself), the less he is an individual. The less he has thought of himself, the more he has sacrificed all individuality during his lifetime ... the more he is an individual.⁸

Education is necessary, but knowledge is essential for wisdom. Vivekananda was very much in favour of imparting scientific knowledge and technical power that are conducive to material development of man. Yet, his familiarity with the western style of living had made him aware of the tension, anxiety, violence, intolerance, restlessness and the like prevalent in their society. Life had become a burden in the midst of all material pleasure. The remedy that he chose was a fullscale change from human sensuality to human spirituality. Belief in spirituality could bring in dynamism, rationalism, universalism, and progressivism and, of course, humanism.

Swamiji had a burning passion for his motherland and millions of her sons. As a champion of the masses, he believed that the age-old evils of orthodox priesthood, caste-ridden society, miseries of womanhood, dreadful customs and superstitions and utter poverty could be



eradicated if the common man could be taught the emancipating virtues of Vedantic humanism.

Vivekananda's concept of humanism, however, was not confined to the national scene only. It had its broader ramifications in trying to achieve international solidarity and brotherhood. *Viswam ekam nidam* – The world is a nest. The western humanism which owed its ancestry to ancient Greeks and Romans was much limited in its scope. It excluded the slaves and the outsiders and even dehumanised the criminals. With the emergence of Christianity, Christian humanism addressed exclusively to the believers, setting aside the non-Christians. The shift of faith from God to man was in the wake of classical revival during the Renaissance period. Renaissance humanism is traceable to the 14th century Italian poet Petrarch whose scholarship and enthusiasm for classical Latin writings (the Humanities) gave great impetus to the humanistic movement that eventually spread from Italy to all of Europe. Again, the devastation of World War I, Nazi brutalities and traumatic horrors of World War II opened more and more avenues for international co-operation and solidarity. In his lecture on "Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life", delivered in Madras in 1897, Vivekananda categorically upheld this vision of human solidarity in the following words:

The second great idea which the world is waiting to receive from our Upanishads is the solidarity of this universe. These old, old lines of demarcation and differentiation are vanishing rapidly. ... Our Upanishads say that the cause of all misery is ignorance... It is ignorance that makes us hate each other, it is ignorance of each other that we do not know and do not love each other. As soon as we come to know each other love comes, must come, for, are we not one?

Thus, we find the idea of solidarity coming in, in spite of ourselves. Even in Politics and Sociology problems that were national only twenty years ago can no more be solved on national

grounds. They are assuming huge proportions, gigantic shapes. They can only be solved when looked at in the broader light of international ground. International organisations, international combinations, international laws are the cry of the day.⁹

In the age of transition in Indian civilisation Vivekananda represents an interlude between pre- and post- Oriental Renaissance who rekindled the light of Vedantic humanism from its remote antiquity. Within a short span of 39 years and 7 months (1863 – 1902) he showed to the world the dignity of human soul, the potentiality of man and the rationality of the being – a path of enlightened citizenship. We need to practise developing trust in the good of human beings and join hands with the good if we are to feel the strength inherent in goodness. A terrorist attack may appear fearfully powerful and get noticed globally, but the innumerable silent acts of vigilance that go to thwart such attacks every day are bound to remain unnoticed.¹⁰ Needless to say, it becomes imperative on our part to develop this belief in the globalised world of 21st century.

References :

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