



REVIEW ARTICLE

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S SOCIAL ETHICS – A PRAXIS APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda, the spiritual leader of modern India and rejuvenator of Hinduism has tremendous achievements to his credit during his short span of life of 39 years. Though a monk and a spiritual personality, he was not a recluse but enlivened India's religion and its national confidence which was at its lowest level after over a hundred years of colonial rule. At a time when Hinduism was criticized by western thinkers as archaic and socially offensive he showed to the Indian themselves and to the west how the idealistic philosophy of Hinduism can be practiced as a socially consistent humanitarian ethics. In all his speeches, writings and preachings he proclaimed the universality, tolerant and humanist philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. His message was basically spiritual and philosophical but it had deep practical social implications.

Swamiji has not written a treatise on ethics, not even anything that can be directly ascribed to as ethics. The word 'Ethics' does not figure in any title of his many books and essays now published in 9 volumes. Moreover, there is a lived ethics that is easily observable in his very visible though short, publicly engaging life. The ethics which is visible in his short span of life is both systematic and practical.

1. Systematic – In the sense that there is a metaphysical foundation on the basis of which his ethical beliefs and practices originate.
2. Practical – In the sense that Vivekananda's ethics is closely related to the affairs of everyday life.

The Ethics which can be 'constructed' out of the writings of Swamiji is not only practical, it both practical and social. We call Vivekananda's ethics as social ethics rather than practical and applied ethics because we believe that Vivekananda's ethics had a distinctive relation to issues that pertained to the society in general rather than matters of individual sins like mercy-killing, abortion etc. which are also practical moral problems having social ramifications. But his concentration was more on issues like poverty, illiteracy of the masses, freedom from bondage, emancipation of women, religious tolerance, uplift of the unprivileged classes and castes etc. If we discuss the metaphysics of Vivekananda we find that the most attractive aspect of his thought is its claim to have broken the abstractness and impracticality of the advaita philosophy and made it 'social vedanta'. His 'institutionalized practice of Seva' based on a truly modern religio-social philosophy is sometimes rightly characterized as 'bringing Vedanta out of

the Forest'¹. Before Vivekananda the *chasm* between the high-flown advaita abstraction and its relevance to practice was wide, as he narrates anecdotally in a talk delivered in London on Vedanta and privilege. If I ask one of our priests in India, "Do you believe in Vedanta?" – he says, "That is my religion I certainly do; that is my life". "Very well, do you admit the equality of all life, the sameness of everything "Certainly, I do". The next moment, when a low-caste man approaches this priest, he jumps to one side of the street to avoid that man. "Why do you jump"? Because his very touch would have polluted me". "But you were just saying we are all the same and you admit there is no difference in souls". He says "Oh, that is in theory only for householders; when I go into a forest, then I will look upon everyone as the same."² Vivekananda choose advaita as his superimposing model of thought, he was firmly standing with in the traditional intellectual culture of India. However he gave a magnificent twist to advaita abstraction by making it practical, ethical and social. He realized the potential of the monistic philosophy of Advaita to reinterpret Hinduism in terms of modern humanitarian and social virtues, which he thought were absent in the Hinduism of his time. To him, realizing oneness with the universe and every other human being, humanitarianism becomes nothing but serving one's own self. If this be the metaphysics of Vivekananda, how does it lead to an ethics? We can answer this question by quoting from the complete works: If there were only one existence throughout, how could it be that I am one, and you are one, and so forth? We are all one, and the cause of evil is the perception of duality. As soon as I begin to feel that I am separate from this universe, then first comes fear, and then comes misery. "Where one hears another, one sees another, that is small. Where one does not see another, where one does not hear another, that is the greatest, that is

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God. In that greatest is perfect happiness. In small things there is no happiness.”... Behind everything the same divinity is existing, and out of this comes the basis of morality. Do not injure another. Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself. From this also springs that principle of Advaita morality which has been summed up in one word – self-abnegation. The Advaitist says, this little personalised self is the cause of all misery. This individualized self, which makes me different from all other beings, brings hatred and jealousy and misery, struggle and all other evils. And when this ideas has been got rid of, all struggle will cease, all misery vanish. So this is to be given up. We must always hold ourselves ready, even to give up our lives for the lowest beings.³

If we study Vivekananda’s philosophy we find it is based on the following principles.

- 1) Liberty
- 2) Equality
- 3) Fraternity
- 4) Spiritual modernity
- 5) Humanitarian service

Swami Vivekananda not only propagated his principles and preachings to be practiced by the people of the world but he himself practiced these principles in his own life. Taking some examples from his life we will explain his teachings and actions. From his boyhood Vivekananda challenged the existing traditional religious norms and rights to find out the truth. The wellknown story of smoking the hokkas used by different caste who used to come to his father as clients, to challenge the existing caste system. On being asked by his father, his famous reply was that he was just testing how he could be an out-caste. Vivekananda’s heart was full of kindness. That is why, while he was small boy he used to help the poors and beggars by giving them the necessary articles from his home.⁴ One of the characteristic of Vivekananda was his solicitude for others. For instance, while he was reading in college, one of his classmates was unable to pay his required fees. Vivekananda helped him to be exempted from paying the college fees by tactfully convincing the head clerk of the college.⁵ Vivekananda has broken all barriers of caste system, while he was traveling India, one day, he wanted to smoke hukka from a man who was smoking sitting under a tree. While the man was requested by Vivekananda to give him hukka, the man refused to give on the ground that he is an untouchable (sweeper). But Vivekananda took the hukka and smoke to his heart content.⁶ Thus he has broken the barrier of untouchability and considered them as the son of God and there is no discrimination between higher caste and lower caste.

Swami Vivekananda’s love for the poor and downtrodden is legendary. He said, “May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in the sumtotal of all souls.”⁷ Thus he displayed deep sympathy for the poor Santhal labourers engaged in the construction work at the Belur Math. One day he fed them sumptuously and told “You are Narayanas, God manifest; today I have offered food to Narayana”. To a disciple he said, ‘I found them the veritable embodiments of God – such simplicity, such sincere guideless

love, I have seen nowhere’.⁸ Vivekananda preached everybody to serve and love man because God manifests himself through all living beings. He often used to say “If you want to find God serve man”. This principle he observed in his life very much. For example, when plague broke out in Calcutta in April 1898, and the remedial measures adopted by the Government were highly dissatisfactory. Swamiji came down from Darjeeling where he had gone to recover his health and organized various preventive measures. On being asked by his disciples where from will the funds come? He said we shall sell the newly purchased Math grounds. Fortunately this was not necessary. He founded Ramkrishnan Mission and Belur Math on the principle of ‘Atmano Moksharthana Jagadhitayacha’. (For one’s own salvation and for the welfare of the world). Thus when plague again broke out next year, the Ramkrishna Mission undertook relief work under the leadership of Swami Sadananda assisted by Sister Nivedita and others.⁹

While in Calcutta, a member of cow protection society approached Swamiji in monetary help to protect cows from butchers. When Swamiji asked them whether they have done anything for lakhs of people affected by a severe famine in Central India. He replied negatively and opined that the famine could be due to ‘Karma’ of men and their sins. Swamiji was displeased because these organizations had no sympathy for people dying of starvation.¹⁰ For years after years in India there was a great conflict in existing religious belief of the people about the nature of God, whether God is formless or having form? Swamiji said God is both formless and with form according to the will of Devotee. While he was visiting Rajasthan, ruler of Alwar Mongal Singh met Vivekananda, questioned and ridiculed the idol worship. At the moment Swamiji saw a photograph of Maharaja hanging in the wall. He asked someone to bring it down and most surprisingly to spit on the photography but none came up to do so. Then Swamiji explained to Maharaja that although the photograph does not move, talk, does not have flash and blood but even then the photographs reminds them about their Maharaja. In the same way, the devotees worship the idol because they consider the idol as their God but not as stone or clay. Mongal Singh was stunned and beg pardon and became his disciple.¹¹

While Swamiji was in America, a daughter and heiress of a multimillionaire proposed Swamiji to marry her and to own her property. But Swamiji replied that being a Sanyasi he cannot marry. To him all the women were like his mother. Thus he rejected the beautiful girl as well as her property. His personality was so strong that no temptation could move him from his standpoint. He was above the desire of worldly happiness.¹² Once Swamiji was staying at Kashi in the house of Promodadas babu. There he got the news of the death of one of the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Baloram Bose. Swamiji was crying for Balaram babu. Being strange, Promoda babu asked him being a Sanyasi you should not cry, you are beyond everything. Swamiji replied what are you saying? I have become a Sanyasi but I cannot reject my heart. The heart of a Sanyasi should be more soft than common man. He was my fellow brother. The Sanyasi which makes the heart hard, I reject that kind of Sanyas.¹³ Vivekananda was always after the truth without proper investigation and critical enquiry he never accepted anything in his life. Whether his

guru Ramakrishna was true in his words or not, he tried to test it. Sri Ramakrishna rejected metals and could not touch coins. One day Vivekananda went to Dakshineswar temple and found that Sri Ramakrishna went to Calcutta. He then kept a coin under the bed of Sri Ramakrishna when Ramakrishna came back and touched his bed, he felt tremendous agony and pain and then the coin was discovered from the bed. Vivekananda was stund and speechless to see the incident. Ramakrishna also understood that his disciple was examining him before accepting. Thus Swamiji himself tested anything from all side and also preached his followers not to accept anything before testing.

When he visited Pandicherry he met an orthodox Brahmin who started argument with Swamiji on social reform, Hinduism and the issue of crossing of sea. The pandit being angry again and again rejected the generous views of Swamiji. Then Swamiji told, my friend, every Indian have the right to test and verify the truths of religion with an open mid and if there is something which is against the high philosophical, religious or social upliftment then these things should be given up. Education, principle of equality and liberation from oppression of priestly class and caste system were very much essential to remove the social problems and indiscipline.¹⁴ On 10th Oct 1897 from Kashmir he wrote to Akhandananda to establish an orphan house. In that orphan house Muslim boys also should be sheltered but their religion should not be changed. He wrote Hindu, Muslim and Christian boys should be taken and the universal principles of religion should be taught and not any particular religion.¹⁵ At the present context of Indian society he understood that the Hindu monk should devote themselves into the service of the people. He rather put emphasis on self-less service, nay worship of the people to make Vedanta fruitful in the daily life. He said self-less service does not mean it properly what he intended to mean so he used the word worship. According to him, worship of people is the worship of God through the self less work service and worship the mind of a person would be purified and then he might realize the truth the Atman – the ultimate Brahman. Thus he said “This is the gist of all worship – to be pure and to do good to others. He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak and in the diseased, really worships Shiva, and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary.

He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him without thinking of his castes or creed or race or anything. With him Siva, is more pleased than with the man who sees him only in temples.”¹⁶ These are few examples from the treasure of many what he preached he practiced. Many great people preached noble things but very few of them practice it in their life. There are different interpretations of the philosophy which Vivekananda preached. One regards him as an idealist philosopher and a religious mystic. His disciple mostly follow this interpretation. The other interpretation by the radicalists who consider him as a great Marxist is that he worked for a complete social and economic revolution. It would be wrong to brand him purely as an idealist or a Marxist. Vivekananda was a realist, rationalist and spiritualist in his humanist philosophy of advaita.

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