

Cultural Reforms of Vivekananda: An Analysis

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Abstract—Vivekananda was not only a social reformer and a social activist but was also a saint, a patriot, a poet, a spiritual teacher, a humanist, an educationist, a sociologist and an orator also. As a social reformer he made attempts to uplift the downtrodden masses from poverty, ignorance, bondage, blind belief etc. For a proper understanding of Indian culture, an in-depth study of Swami Vivekananda is imperative. It is because Vivekananda once spoke of himself as a ‘condensed India’. His life as well as his teachings are of inestimable value for the complete understanding of the Indian mind. Indian culture got reinvigorated by his interpretation of the scriptures, philosophy and the way of life to the modern world. Revitalizing spiritual power, emphasis on Sanskrit language, emphasis on synthesis on yoga are his major concern so far as the issue of cultural reform is concerned.

Index Terms—Vivekananda, reform, culture, India, spirituality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Vivekananda was not only a social reformer and a social activist but was also a saint, a patriot, a poet, a spiritual teacher, a humanist, an educationist, a sociologist and an orator also. As a social reformer he made attempts to uplift the downtrodden masses from poverty, ignorance, bondage, blind belief etc. He said “bondage brings only misery.”¹ Therefore he asked everyone to make themselves free from bondage, bondage from superstition, bondage from poverty and bondage from any other degenerating system. In his view superstition makes the brain of man dull. Regarding superstition he says ‘Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse, if superstition enters, the brain is gone.’² Hence he says “Do not run after these superstitions. Better for you and for the race that you become rank atheists, because you would have strength, but if these are degradation and death, shame on humanity that strong men should spend their time in inventing allegories to explain the most rotten superstitions of the world. Be bold, do not try to

explain everything that way. The fact is that we have many superstitions, many bad spots and sores on our body. These have to be excised, cut off, and destroyed but these do not destroy our religion, our national life, our spirituality.”³ Vivekananda observed that the illiterate people observed peculiar systems of superstitions to worship the Gods. The educated man should avoid all superstitions, omen, and blind beliefs. Every system which makes us superstitious, makes us weak, must be completely avoided.

As a humanistic philosopher and social reformer he always thought for the betterment of the poor and backward people of India. He had realized that until weaker and low class people were not well kept and maintained through proper education and nourishment, the society could not develop. So he suggested very strongly that “The only way of getting our divine nature manifested is by helping others to do the same. If there is inequality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all or if greater for some and some less, the weaker should be given more chance than the strong.”⁴ In other words, a Brahman is not so much in need of education as a Chandala. If the ten of Brahman needs one teacher, that of Chandala needs ten. For greater help must be given to him whom nature has not endowed with an acute intellect from birth.

Swami Vivekananda was not a man living in an ivory tower. His feet were firmly planted on the earth. Nothing concerning man would escape his notice. Man was a living God for him. Man was divine but his divinity was hidden by a veil of poverty, ignorance and superstition. His chief concern was to remove this veil so that the divinity ‘already’ in man might come out in the open. While in the west he talked of India’s great spiritual heritage, on return to India the refrain of his ‘Lectures from Colombo to Alomar’ was uplift of the masses, eradication of the caste virus, promotion of the study of science Industrialization of the country, removal of poverty the end of the colonial rule, in brief

he was preoccupied with his attack on the countries socio-economic ills. It is inspiring that the solutions that this philosopher-monk offered are still the best.

In the following pages we have discussed how Swami Vivekananda tried to reform Indian culture.

Objective of the study- The present paper aims to elaborate Swami Vivekananda's Cultural reforms.

Methodology- Analytical method has been applied to this paper. Data from both [primary and secondary sources have been collected and on the basis of that collected data an analytical discussion has been made.

II. CULTURAL REFORM OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

For a proper understanding of Indian culture, an in-depth study of Swami Vivekananda is imperative. It is because Vivekananda once spoke of himself as a 'condensed India'. His life as well as his teachings are of inestimable value for the complete understanding of the Indian mind. Indian culture got reinvigorated by his interpretation of the scriptures, philosophy and the way of life to the modern world. Vivekananda has pointed out that every civilization or culture has a particular life-center, a dominant characteristic. It is this particular life-centre that determines the life-span of that culture. In the Indian context, one can see throughout its history, invaders after invaders making barbarous attacks on this land. Vivekananda says any other nation with even one tenth of this attack would have been wiped off from this earth. But India is still surviving. The reason behind this is the spiritual strength of the country. "This is the land from whence, like the tidal waves, spirituality and philosophy have again and again rushed out and deluged the world, and this is the land from whence once more such tides must proceed in order to bring life and vigour into the decaying races of mankind."⁵ He again says "It is the same India which has withstood the shocks of centuries, of hundreds of foreign invasions, of hundreds of upheavals of manners and customs. It is the same land which stands firmer than any rock in the world, with its undying vigor, indestructible life. Its life is of the same nature as the soul, without beginning and without end, immortal; and we are the children of such a country."⁶ According to him, the life-Centre of Indian culture is spirituality. It has to be mentioned here that Vivekananda for the upliftment of the downtrodden Indians first tried to imbibe the idea of

spirituality in their minds. He gave Indians proper understanding of their country's great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past. He further says about culture that it is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge. We can put a mass of knowledge into the world, but that will not do it much good. There must come culture into the blood.

According to Swami Vivekananda, Sanskrit language is the primary tool to preserve the Indian culture. He opines that Sanskrit is the real success of Indian culture and is capable of removing the caste barriers, untouchability etc. The ideas must be taught in their mother language; at the same time, Sanskrit education must go on along with it, because the very sound of Sanskrit words gives prestige and strength to the race. The attempts of the great personalities like great Ràmànuja, Chaitanya and Kabir to raise the lower classes of India show that marvellous results were attained during the lifetime of those great prophets. But they could not wholly succeed in their planes. The effect of their teachings stopped almost within a century of the passing away of these great Masters. The secret is here. They raised the lower classes; they had all the wish that lower classes should come up. But they did not apply their energies to the spreading of the Sanskrit language among the masses. Vivekananda opines that even the great Buddha took one false step when he stopped the Sanskrit language from being studied by the masses. Buddha wanted rapid results, and translated and preached in the language of the day, Pàli. That was grand; he spoke in the language of the people, and the people understood his ideas. Because of using the language of the people his ideas spread quickly and made them reach far and wide. But, according to Vivekananda through the Pali language knowledge came, but the prestige was not there, culture was not there. Therefore along with that, Sanskrit ought to have spread.

Again, Vivekananda showed that the Vedanta philosophy which forms the bedrock of Indian culture is very practical. The great insight of the Upanishads, the relationship between the atman and Brahman, is the keynote upon which the entire Vedantic teachings revolve and which is summed up beautifully in his statement, 'Each soul is potentially divine.' Man's exploration of his deepest self, is not only essential for his spiritual progress, but indispensable for his survival. Recognizing the innate divinity as basis of

all-embracing love is the hallmark of Indian culture. It is to this unique principle of inherent divinity that Swami Vivekananda drew our attention in modern times. In a sense, the greatest contribution of Vivekananda to Indian culture is that he built up his new universal gospel of divine humanism based on the concept of man as divine. Vivekananda with an intellectuality and foresight showed the supreme necessity of ministering to the physical, intellectual and spiritual needs of suffering humanity by initiating large-scale organized works of service to be done in the true spirit of worship as an efficacious means to self-realization popularly known as 'Practical Vedanta'.

Another significant contribution of Swami Vivekananda is to show the relevance of Yoga. Sri Krishna in Bhagavad Gita had tried to popularize and synthesize the Yoga and Vedanta. But in course of time, yoga had taken its back due to the popularization of Vedanta. Vivekananda reinterpreted the four main paths of Yoga. He showed how a proper synthesis of these four main paths is the necessity of the age and he converted the traditional four yogas into wonderful spiritual disciplines suited for the age. This could be considered one of his significant contributions to Indian culture. He synthesized action, love, and philosophy by making it easy and modern for the present-day believers. Moreover, even atheists could practice Karma and Raja yoga. He showed that the four yogas are different facets of the human personality that can lead one to self-realization. The emotional, intellectual, active and psychic faculties of the mind are channelled in bhakti, jnana, karma, and raja yogas respectively. A synergy of these yogas could quicken the attainment of the goal.

III. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it has been surveyed that Swami Vivekananda can be rightly said a social reformer. He tried to revitalize India with its ancient traditions along with modern science. One special character of Vivekananda's reform is that he did not try to abolish the systems prevalent in then India. Rather he wants to make them grow in their true form. Vivekananda undoubtedly took immense pride in the India's inheritance from the past.

During the time of Vivekananda, religion, specially the Hindu religion was nothing except priest craft. He

through his religious lectures has shown that religion consists only in self-realization and realizing the same self in others. We all are part of the same Brahman. So we all are divine. And divinity is within us. This he preached to arouse the self-confidence in people. This was really a bold step. Because at that time the priest had an overwhelming power on society. But he could not stop himself in showing the people of India that religion consists in self-realization only. Again at that time the caste system was much degenerated. It was based on birth. He showed that caste is not based on birth, but on individual's quality.

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- [4] C.W.S. VOL.6, p-319.
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