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A SOCIAL REFORMER IN DISGUISE OF A SAINT

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ABSTRACT

As a preacher of universal religion, Swami Vivekananda is well known both in the East and the West. To the common man, he is first and foremost an exponent of Vedanta and nothing else but he should not be regarded exclusively as a religious prophet. His individuality and thought should not be measured by any rigid classification. Though his chief occupation of life was religion, he made significant observations on every aspect of life.

The work of Swami Vivekananda, which contain various strands of his thought, provide us the glimpses of his social and political ideals also. It is on the basis of his works that he established his place in the history of India as a social thinker and reformer.

Keywords : Social, Political, Thinker, Reformer.

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I knew him a preacher of religion when I had just been introduced about him by my teacher in school. By the time I knew him as a leader of religion who was the most appreciated in the parliament of religion and made India pride. Eventually I came across his so many facets which were not even known by the people yet. A strange personality who started his life in a well off family, a prodigious child, a brilliant mind, a curious brain to know each and everything turned as a monk one day, yet he lived for the mankind. He in his spiritual itinerary came to know the strength of the Indian spirit and weakness of the society. Conditions of India were atrocious to him. He felt that there were multiple evils such as existence of caste privileges and social inequalities at the time that hindered India's growth and hastened its degeneration. The pervasive economic poverty and ignorance of the masses moved him to tears. He was shocked to see

that India was forgetting its national individuality and spiritualism by imitating the West. Problems he confronted in India were many and he bestowed his thought and activity in overcoming them by national reconstruction on spiritual basis. It was also in this aspect of national rejuvenation that Vivekananda engraved a high place for himself among the galaxy of political leaders and thinkers of modern India.

He emerged as a social reformer and revolutionary in his application of ends and means i.e. selfless activities to solve the problems of society. He looks at the reforms from the point of individual as well as social growth. And for that he always kept his religion separate from his social philosophy.

He was against imitation. He said that imitation is not civilization. Imitation never makes for progress. It is verily the sign of awful degradation. He said, "I do not condemn the

institutions of other races; they are good for them, but not for us.”¹

His comparative study of the Western society and India revealed to him the spiritual poverty of the west and environmental weakness of India. Therefore, he stood for mutual exchange of spiritual knowledge of the East and scientific knowledge of the West.

In his view, all men have to transcend their petty interests for the wellbeing of the society. There is no short cut to such a life. It can be done only through gradual transition. Only in this lies the individual and social happiness.

He gave a long list of the causes responsible for India's degeneration. Chief among them were –

- (i) Absence of Shraddha
- (ii) Anglicized spirit
- (iii) Dishonesty
- (iv) Disregard for physical wellbeing
- (v) Fear complex
- (vi) Lack of originality
- (vii) Laziness
- (viii) Narrowness
- (ix) Neglect of Religion
- (x) Weakness etc.

He also suggested certain remedies –

- (i) Liberation of women
- (ii) Uplift of the masses
- (iii) Positive education

He traced the downfall of Indian society to the continued neglect of women and masses, therefore these two were the most important items in Swami Vivekananda's programme of social regeneration.

The one thing that is at the root of all evils in India is the condition of the poor. The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality.

His plans were to reach these masses of India to bring all the ideals slowly down among them. He said, “Suppose you start schools all over India for the poor, still you cannot educate them. How can you? ...Why should not education go from door to door, say I. If a ploughman's boy cannot come to education, why not meet him at the plough, at the factory, just wherever he is?”²

He believed that if Indians wanted to solve their problems and to take steps towards progress, they would have to rely on themselves. To him, weakness was the chief cause of the miseries of Indian people.

He criticized the existing system of education; because it is not a man-making education, it is merely a negative education. To him, education is not the amount of information that is put into our brain and runs riot there, undigested, all our life. He stressed the comprehensive nature of education. It should aim at the physical culture, cultivation of arts, study of humanities with special reference to Indian culture, and scientific and technological training.

He believed that changes in society should be based on the harmony of community. He was of the view that people must know the necessity of reform and the demand for reform must also come from them.

But he considered socialism only as a means. His end was to seek and promote human unity and divinity. As a humanist he regarded man not only as an end in himself but also held that man is divine by nature.

He said, “All healthy social changes are the manifestations of the spiritual forces working within, and if these are strong and well adjusted, society will arrange itself accordingly.”³

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