

# Swami Vivekananda and Social Change

*Swami Sarvottamananda*

Swami Vivekananda proclaimed, “*That society is the greatest, where the highest truths become practical. That is my opinion, and if society is not fit for the highest truths, make it so, and the sooner the better.*” According to him, thus, that society is the acme of perfection where it is practical to practise highest ideals. It goes without saying that he was a fervent believer that society can be changed, and needs to be changed for better, however counter to intuition it may seem so to current traditionalists theological thinkers.

It is natural for every person in every culture and society wishes for a change to better, because fundamentally one is incomplete in the world and there is a constant search for one's completion. However, surprisingly, there is also at the same time an underlying aversion to change oneself. This is the dichotomy of *Maya*. That may be because of inherent selfishness of a person and a certain lethargy to put tremendous effort and will power that one needs to change oneself. Essentially, what it boils down to is this attitude—Even though I do not want to change myself, nay, I would not change myself, I wish that everyone else would change to make the world a better place for me. This is a strange state of things. And unless we change this unconscious foolish notion there is no hope for a better world.

In the current modern times, everywhere there is a desire and clamour for change. People seem to be fed up with politicians, bureaucrats, the judiciary and also the government machinery. There are voices to be heard against rampant corruption of state officials on one hand and also general apathy of the common public on another. We hear a movement against government corruption run by people like Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev. There is also an outcry in national capital because of atrocities against women. This simply implies that people want a change. But the real question is are they really ready for the effort and price to pay. It is hard to say. While the young are optimistic about the future, the old mind tries to stick to pessimistic view point. And when the desirous change is not brought about the old mind is quick to point out that “They said so.” But whatever it may be, for the first time in the recent history of the nation people want a social change sincerely and are seemingly ready to work for it.

## Spiritual Change vis-a-vis Social Change

Swami Vivekananda was basically a spiritual master. So definitely he looked every change through the eye of spirituality. To him every change was but an effort to manifest the divine spiritual principle. It did not make any difference to him whether that divine principle was internal or external. To say in other words, whether it was manifestation of *Atman* as an individual divine principle or whether it was manifestation of *Brahman*, the cosmological divine principle—*vyashti* or *samashti* principle, he always worked to bring about spiritual progress in individual and collective.

To this end he has said, “All healthy social changes are manifestations of the spiritual forces working within and if these are strong and well adjusted, society will arrange itself accordingly. Each individual has to work out his own solution; there is no other way, and so also with nations. Again, the great institutions of every nation are the conditions of its very existence and cannot be transformed by the mould of any other race. Until higher institutions have been evolved, any attempt to break the old ones will be disastrous. Growth is always gradual.”

What does have our scriptures to say on the topic? While they are profuse about the spiritual development of a person, they are mum or say very little about the collective social development. A question therefore arises, are they really silent because social development is impossible or is it because they were less interested in it. We sincerely think and hope that it is the latter which is true. The ancient scripture had their eyes fixed on the individual's spiritual development and gave little thought to social development. Yet there were efforts to keep society in check too. We find in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* that lot of thought was put into well-being of society and what would be the duties of each and every person. Same goes with various *Smritis*.

However, without a grain of any doubt whatsoever, our scriptures advocated and eulogized individual's spiritual development. And on the other hand if we search for reasons for the advocacy of social development we are left with a want. However, if we dig a little deeper, it stands to reason, that the scriptures are not against social development and to some extent they do advocate social development, if *Smritis* are the gauge by which we measure.

## The Philosophy of Change

Though it may seem absurd on the face, there are people with convoluted thinking who say that we should not work for the betterment of world as the world is going to remain the same. Some of them go as far as pointing out that it is equally futile to work for our betterment as we will get what fate has in store for us. This is *law of fate* at work in opposition to *law of karma*. This is a very strange idea difficult for a man who has have a secular upbringing or who has an open mindset to digest. The traditional interpreters of Vedanta and also the proponents of Bhakti have all likened the world to a curly tail as in the story of curly tail of a dog and djinn.

The story goes like this. Once a disciple of a famed guru came to know that all one's problems are solved if one possesses a djinn. He knew that his guru had mastered the method of taking possession of djinns, so he went to his guru and implored that he teach him how to possess a djinn. Initially the guru was reluctant but when the disciple pestered on continuously he gave up and taught the disciple a method to possess a djinn. But as a final warning he told the disciple to be extremely cautious because the djinns are tricky and dangerous creatures.

However, the disciple was very happy and immediately set about possessing a djinn. The process taught by his guru was genuine and in a matter of few months, his efforts bore fruit and a djinn appeared before him. The djinn bellowed, "O, my master, I am bound to fulfill every wish of yours, and you are to keep me busy all the time. If I become free of work and you fail to give me another work I will devour you." "No matter", the disciple thought, "I have so much work, that I can keep the djinn busy for ages." "Toil in my fields, sow the crops and work till the harvest is done." he ordered the djinn, but no sooner the words have escaped his mouth, the ground was tilled, the seed sown, watered, sprouted, grew into crops and harvested. All this in a moment's notice. The disciple was awestruck, but he kept his wits and ordered next, "Build me a palace with seven floors, with big gardens all around." "Done!" was the answer he got from djinn.

Now the disciple was afraid. Whatever work he gave to the djinn it was finished in a jiffy. And immediately after finishing the work, the djinn would be at the head of disciple threatening to eat him. The disciple was in a quandary. "Wait", he said, "Take me to my guru." The djinn flew him to his guru. The disciple fell at the feet of the guru and hurriedly told him the whole story of happenings while the djinn was still at his heels.

The guru smiled and told the djinn to bring a really curly tail of a dog. When the djinn brought the curly tail the guru asked the djinn to make that curly tail straight. The djinn straightened the curly tail but as soon as he let it go, the tail would curl up again. The djinn struggled with it for a long time but the matters remained same. Tired, he said to guru that he had served many a master in the past yet he was never given such a hard task before and told him that if he let him go he will never trouble the disciple again.

The story is an anecdote to the fact that the world is like a curly tail of dog and no one can ever straightened it up. It is equally futile to work to make the world perfect.

But the opposite idea is also there in scriptures. Krishna has said that in time there will be as many Krishnas as there are grapes in a grape vine. It points to the fact that in future there will be abundance of avatars and everyone will be free. If this does not mark the epitome of the perfection of a society definitely then what else will.

The same idea is conveyed by the idea of *Mahapralaya* in *puranas*. A *Kalpa* is the time period which is a single day of *Brahma*, and *pralay* is his night. When the *Brahma* changes, everything returns to the essence of *Brahman*, and everything starts anew. This is the time when it is said that every living being is freed. If that is not so, then one

may indeed ask what is the difference between *pralaya* and *mahapralaya* except for the fact that *Brahma* is changed.

The scriptures do not say that society is unchangeable. Instead, on the contrary, the society, and the world is constantly changing as opposed to the unchangeable supreme reality of *Brahman/Atman*. Change is the name of world. So sometimes some change is for the good of the world and sometimes it is for the worse.

In the yoga sutras it is mentioned—*jatyantarparinamah prakriyapurat | tatah kshetrikavat |*. This clearly mentions the idea of evolution of species and by augmentation the idea of social evolution. Further it says that all the evolution is as a result of infilling of our nature. To bring about a change, we only have to manifest the perfection that is within. An amoeba is a Buddha involved and a Buddha is an amoeba evolved. Outer causes can help but they alone are insufficient in bringing about the change.

## Can Society be Changed?

The followers of Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda ideology usually believe that society can be changed and should be changed for the better. Otherwise there is no sense for “*atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha*”. The *jagaddhitaya cha* part emphasises that it is possible to do good to the world.

Swami Vivekananda strongly believed that the society can be changed for better. He proclaimed that he will come to this world again and again till every living soul believes that it is one with the infinity. If he were not the believer of social change he would never have said this. The only thing is that he put spiritual well-being before social or physical well-being. His philosophy was that if we took care of our spirituality then our all-round well-being will come about.

Since the idea is that world goes in ups and downs, it is reasonable to assume that world goes up as long as the humanity works for its betterment, while it goes down when such efforts stop. This goes well with the doctrine of Karma—“We reap what we sow.” It is unthinkable that if we put effort to do good to the world it would come to nought. So the world will be on its upward spiral as long as we put an effort for its betterment.

Added to this is the fact that Swami Vivekananda firmly believed that the only way to do good to ourselves is doing good to the world. That is why he prepared the doctrine of *Karma Yoga* as a path of salvation and preached the importance of unselfishness.

## Way to change

To consider ways to change the society we have to look at the constituents of the society. After all what is the society? Society is a collection of individuals. If each one changes himself then the change is achieved. This is oft quoted but seldom practiced dictum. The reason is clear. All want only others to change. That is why in the beginning it was mentioned, when one wants change, what one really wants is that people and circumstances around one should change whereas one remains unchanged.

But we need something more than just an idea. Swami Vivekananda had concrete advise too.

Sitting on the last bit of rock in the Indian ocean, Swami Vivekananda had a vision. He saw the problems of India and the solution. Though he did not mention the solution directly, the readers of literature of Swami Vivekananda are of the belief that what he saw as the solution was two fold—One the spiritual upheaval of the country and second the wide spread education of masses. In many of his lectures also he pointed out that first is the need of education. If we give education to any section of the society then we need not do anything else. They will solve their own problems and raise themselves.

He said later on—“Oh, we are awfully poor, and our masses are very ignorant about secular things. Our masses are very good because poverty here is not a crime. Our masses are not violent. ... We have to give them secular education. We have to follow the plan laid down by our ancestors, that is, to bring all the ideals slowly down

among the masses. Raise them slowly up, raise them to equality. Impart even secular knowledge through religion.”

There is a talk of value education in the academic circles. There is a general need to bring value education in the ambit of secular teaching. Ways are being thought of and tried to be implemented to bring value education in the mainstream curricula of schools and educational institutes.

But the question is how to teach character. It is my belief that character can not be taught in classes. Character can only be built by examples. In other words, it can only be taught by oneself living a life of character. Only if the teacher is of good character will a child imbibe good character. If a child sees his or her elders indulging in vices and at the same time insisting that he or she be of good character then this is not going to help.

The change in individuals mind can only be brought by leaders who lead by life: only those who preach what they practise. In secular education, for example, it hardly matters if the teacher of secular subjects, be it art, science or humanities, is of highest character. But this is not so if we want to teach secular education tinged with character making and spiritual well being. During the education of a person, through out his/her childhood, and even throughout his/her adolescence, it should be done by people who are of impeccable character and high spiritual calibre.

## **Task Before Us**

Swami Vivekananda said there are three things needed to do social work. First of all we should feel for the poor and socially deprived people for whom we are going to work. Only with feeling can great things be achieved. Second we should have a workable plan for social work. Without a plan nothing is going to be achieved. It goes without saying that we should put effort and time to achieve the goals. Thirdly and lastly, we should help the like minded people who are working towards the same goal. Very often in India, any good work falls apart for the want of cohesion. Not only that, most of the time the evil minded are united in their purpose. We find a nexus of evil doers. In corruption, the government machinery works in tandem from top to bottom with a strong network of government officials. Such unity of purpose is seldom present in our social workers.

On this note, it is recommended that we should have a three point agenda to bring about social change. First to raise our character and feel unselfishly for the lower sections of society, second to have a concrete plan of educating all in the lines of what Swami Vivekananda thought, and to put effort and time to bring about its fruition and third to help others who have similar goals.

Also, not enough can be said about this, lest our effort be meaningless, we should be of strong character. Unless we are spiritually strong we will not be able to continue for long, doing social work. To this end, we only need to stick to three things—truth, purity and unselfishness. Swami Vivekananda says that these are the three pillars upon which strong character is built.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we should work together to bring the grand vision of Swami Vivekananda to reality where he saw Mother India seated in her glorious throne shining with a glory that overshadowed her past glory.

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