

Caste System in Perspective of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract: The present study is purported to examine and understand the Indian caste system as the unique ideology of exclusivist doctrine which has its distinctive and continuous impact on Indian social, political and cultural life. A central element in the humanization debate in the Indian context is the desire to return to the concept of equality and social justice. The most distinctive feature of Swami Vivekananda's teaching is that he applied his philosophical principles of Vedanta to the affairs of everyday life. Being a Vedantin, Vivekananda has firm faith in the inner unity of all. He depicts Vedantic society as the ideal form of society as it was based on equality. His ideals and principles of Vedanta are instrumental in patterning and structuring the cultural spheres of people. Every social and cultural change alters the essence of the activities in the different social spheres and is manifested in new interconnections between those spheres. Thus, we observe tremendous changes occur in the progress in traditional India, and the old values relating to caste system. We are especially taking a re-look at the present research topic in a deeper level by taking recourse to the major mode of reformation of caste system in perspective of Swami Vivekananda.

Keywords: Vivekananda, Caste System, Vedanta, Purusha-Sukta, Varnas.

INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda, the great son of modern India was a multifaceted personality. He was an awakener of modern India, who had traveled extensively across the world, speaking about India. He was possibly the foremost person of his times who confronted the question of caste, religion, minorities, modernism, economics and politics of India and he brought about an inspirational perspective to the same. Though a monk and a spiritual personality he does not turn off his eyes from the problems faced by Indian society. He travelled extensively all over India and thereby acquaints himself with the social and economic conditions of the country. Swami Vivekananda sought to realize the root cause of India's miserable condition. He found two great evils in India: poor treatment given to women and subjugation of underprivileged through caste restrictions. Vivekananda considers priest- craft, untouchability etc. as the main evils of the degenerated caste system. Throughout his lifetime he preached against these evils and tried to generate public consciousness against these problems. His suggestions on reforms in Indian life shows that he was in favour of removing these evils not only in religious thought and practice but also in social theories and customs, principles and method of education. According to him, attitude towards low caste has never been in accordance with the teachings of *Vedanta* which hinders the growth of spiritual life.

CASTE SYSTEM

Historically, caste was justified by interpreting the *Purusha-Sukta* in a particular way by saying not only that differences of function in society and their interrelations are part of the natural order of things, but also that attribution of their differences on the basis of births among a certain group of people are part of the natural order too. In *Purusha-Sukta* of the *Rig-Veda*, there is reference to the division of Hindu society into four classes. It is described there that the *Brahmins* came out of the face of the Lord, the Creator, and *Kshatriyas* from His arms and *Vaisyas* from His thighs and the *Sudras* from His feet. This division is done according to the *Guna* and *Karma*. *Guna* (quality) and *Karma* (action/ work) determines the caste of a man. This is supported by Lord Krishna in the *Gita* who advocates that the four castes were emanated by him as well as He is the author of them and thus one needs to know Him.

There are authors like S.C. Roy, [1] N.K. Dutta [2] and G.S. Ghurye [3] who have linked caste with racial factor. The initiation of the Indian caste structure has been credited to the Indo-Aryans and the *Varnas* were said to be of racial origin, diluted in course of time through race mixture and hybridization. The basis of caste system and its classification is the "division of labour" [4] or what is sometimes called "specialization

of functions". The aim behind this classification was said to be better service to the society as a whole.

Vivekananda seems to be the first person to have discovered the link with what is today known in India "caste is class" theory and also to have seen that such was not a perfect formulation. His vision of combining and reading caste and class together is even by today's standard extremely radical and innovative. He was the originator of the word "Dalit",¹ a word to be used for the "pariahs", since it is a direct translation from the word "suppressed" to describe the situation of the "pariahs" of his time.² What Swamiji means is that the modern rigid system of caste distinctions, involving inequality, is very different from its old flexible form, and such a transformation is the cause of the downfall of India. He also holds the priests responsible for it. "It is in the books written by the priests", says he, "that madness like that of caste are to be found; and not in books that revealed from God" [7]. He continues: "But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which, after doing its service, is now filling the atmosphere of India with stench; and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality" [5]. He puts his finger on the evils of modern caste system when he says, "the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor, modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress, it narrows, restricts, separates" [6]. Indeed, he hoped that it will crumble before the advancement of ideas. Signs are not wanting that his prophecy is on the way to fulfillment at no distant date; Swamiji did not recommend the total abolition of caste, but suggested its readjustment according to modern modifications, as would appear from the following passages: "From the time of the *Upanishads* down to the present day, nearly all our great teachers have wanted to break through the barriers of caste, i.e., caste in its degenerated state, not the original system. What little good you see in its degenerated state, not the original system. What little good you see in the present caste clings to it from the original caste, which was the most glorious social institutions" [6]. Castes should not go; but, should only be readjusted accordingly. Within the old structure is to be found life enough for the re-building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is evolution of the old [6].

¹ The word "Dalit (a)" comes from the Sanskrit - root "dal" - means "held under check", "suppressed", or "crushed", or in a looser sense, "oppressed".

² A translation of Vivekananda's use of the English word "suppressed" for the untouchables; Navajivan, 27-3-1927, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi; Vol 38; page 240.

Vivekananda has firm conviction that in ancient India, castes were not really hereditary, but based on qualifications [6]. Hence, if one acquires higher qualities, there is every chance of elevation to a higher status. In this connection he mentions the examples of *Vyasa*, the son of a fisherwoman; servant with uncertain parentage, and many others of like nature, attaining *Risihood* or becoming revered saints or sages [8]. He believes that in the beginning caste system was a functional division of society, working almost on the principle of spiritual unity of all castes. Besides, it was also an excellent mechanism of social adjustment. But with the passage of time, the vested interests arose and became powerful and the system degenerated into a closed society [9].

Swami Vivekananda is inspired by the ideal of social harmony and synthesis embodied in the theory of *Varna* system of ancient India. Generally he uses the term caste in the sense of *Varna* without distinguishing it from the latter. There were four *Varnas*- *Brahmin*, *Kshtriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*. "This system of division into different Vivekananda explains, "is the stepping stone to civilization, making one rise higher and higher in proportion to one's learning and culture" [7].

Varna should be considered as the basis of the congenial vocational temperaments and aptitudes of the people, and not to uphold the superiority or the privileges of some individuals because of their birth and heredity. He translates the term 'caste' as 'first idea of creation'. Creation connotes variation or diversity (*vichitrata*), and 'jati' means 'creation'. According to him, "the original idea of *Jati* (caste) was- this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his *Prakriti*, his *Jati*, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years" [7]. According to Vivekananda, caste is excellent only in natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head. And that is why we want no privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine within, and every one will work out his own salvation [10].

An interesting observation made by Vivekananda on caste is his perception that everybody is composed of all castes. As there are *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*—one or other of these *Gunas* more or less— in every man, so the qualities which makes a man *Brahmin*, *Ksatriya*, *Vaisya*, and *Sudra* are inherent in every man more or less. But at times one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees, and it is manifested accordingly. "Take a man in his different pursuits, for example, when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is in *Sudrahood*; when he is

busy transacting some piece of business for profit, on his own account, he is a *Vaisya*; when he fights to right wrongs, then the qualities of a *Ksatriya* come out in him; and when he meditates on God or pass his time in conversation about Him, then he is a *Brahmin*" [7]. The above observation undergirds the idea that it is quite possible for one to change from one caste into another. Otherwise, how did *Viswamitra* became a *Brahmin* and *Parasurama* a *Ksatriya*? This awareness of sharing the attributes of all castes will hit at the root of arrogant caste consciousness. To him, caste is a means to help everybody in attaining the status of a true *Brahmin*. A *Brahmin* is the one who has exterminated all selfishness. To be a *Brahmin* is to be spiritually enlightened. Thus, basically, by caste, Vivekananda meant the raising of individuals gently and slowly towards the realization of the noble ideal of spiritually enlightened man [9]. As a worshipper of humanity, Vivekananda devotes his whole life to uplift the so-called lower castes. In this regard he says that the plan in India is to make everybody *Brahmin*. Here *Brahmin* is considered as the ideal of humanity. By the *Brahmin* ideal he meant the ideal *Brahmin*-ness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present [7].

He believes that when people belonging to the various strata of society evolve up to this ideal, the differences among castes will reduce and may totally disappear one day. This is what he means by 'leveling up'. He says that from the highest man to the lowest *Pariah*, everyone has to try and become the ideal *Brahmin* [11]. But the original caste system of India unfortunately degenerated in the course of time into a kind of rigid, cruel casteism bringing about numerous social evils in its wake as well as working for permanent injuries in the social structure of India. Thus human nature being what it is, men of different caste groups – originally formed purely on the basis of inclinations, abilities and qualifications implying flexibility, allowing all to change their caste groups, according to corresponding changes in their inclinations, abilities and qualifications began after a time to claim rights and privileges, even without proportionate duties and abilities. Thus a question arose of the higher and the lower; the *Brahmin*, the scholar and the spiritual being taken as the highest class; the *Ksatriya*, the warrior and the political ruler, coming second; the *Vaisya* the trader and the economic guide, coming third, the *Sudra*, the labourer, coming last. Thus the original sublime idea that "All work is equal, hence all human beings are also so, was soon lost and the great unifying institution of caste soon degenerated into a great dividing factor" [8]. The degenerated caste system opens the flood gate to a host of social evils headed by priest-craft on the one hand, in the case of the *Brahmins*, the highest caste; and untouchability on the other hand, in the case of the *Sudras*, the lowest one.

Swami Vivekananda, the living symbol of justice and love, naturally could not on any account tolerate such injustice and callousness for a single moment. Hence, just as he is full of praise for the real, original caste system of India, he is equally full of blame for the latter, degenerated, so called casteism of India. According to him, the present caste is not the real *Jati*, but a hindrance to its progress. It really prevented the free action of *Jati*, i.e., caste on variation. Any crystallized custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (*Jati*) from having its full sway. Every frozen aristocracy or privileged class is a blow to caste and is not caste. Let *Jati* have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste, and we shall rise [7]. In his day to day activity we find a clear instance of violating this custom. In his wandering life as a monk, Swami Vivekananda neither hesitates to drink water from an outcaste nor be indecisive to share huddle-buddle with a low-caste people. He has eaten food of the poorest and humblest people whom no caste man (upper caste people) would condescend to touch, and he has accepted their hospitality with thankfulness.

Swamiji condemns hereditary caste and says, "Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas" [8]. According to Vivekananda, evils like caste system (in the degraded form) and untouchability are obstacles to our national integrity. He publicly criticizes and advocates against the prevalent caste system. He even supports inter-caste marriage so as to establish equality in the society for breaking the concept of privilege. To him, the prevalent caste system handicapped the Hindu society to progress. Hence, the evils of caste system should be rooted out for the unity of Indian society which is totally irrelevant in the present socio-economic condition. He strongly refutes the thesis of religious sanction for the caste system. He says that from Buddha to Rammohan, all consider caste as a religious concept and try to abolish it; but they fail in their attempt because caste is not a religious custom [12]. According to him, caste is a social custom. He observes that the doctrine of caste in the '*Purusa Sukta*' of *Rig Veda*, does not make it hereditary. He maintains that "the caste system is opposed to the religion of *Vedanta*". According to him, caste system became hereditary much before the *Puranic* age.

CONCLUSION

Vivekananda realizes that the problems relating to caste cannot be solved within a short period of time. He says that the solution is not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level of the higher. The ideal at one end is the *Brahmin*, and the ideal at the other end is the *Chandala*; and the whole work is to raise the *Chandala* up to the *Brahmin*.

Vivekananda points out that he has nothing to do directly with the castes or with social reformation. What he wants is a thorough overhauling of society. As in the case of caste system Vivekananda wants reforms to come not from above but from below, not through the efforts of the social reformers with the help of government legislation, but through the endeavour of the common educated people as a result of the growth of a new social consciousness. Though Vivekananda strongly criticizes the degenerated caste system of his time, yet he is definitely against the total and permanent abolition of the caste system. Rather he wants the total and permanent abolition of the cruel and unjust social customs, due to a misinterpretation – perhaps intentional, perhaps not of the real, original implications of the caste system. He always is of the opinion that the real, original caste system was highly beneficial one; and so, should be properly adjusted to suit modern societies, instead of being totally rejected. Caste is continually changing, rituals are continually changing, and so are the forms. It is the substance, the principle that does not change. Castes should not go; but, should only be re-adjusted – occasionally, within the old structure is to be found life enough for the re-building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is – evolution of the old. Thus, Swamiji suggests that caste system is just a form of order to run the society smoothly. It is not water tight compartment. This classification is only on the basis of the work but not on the basis of anybody's birth. To him, a man belonging to any caste should not be treated as lower and higher. Being a *Vedantin*, Vivekananda has firm faith in the inner unity of all. He depicts *Vedantic* society as the ideal form of society as it was based on equality. The most distinctive feature of Swami Vivekananda's teaching is that he applied his philosophical principles of *Vedanta* to the affairs of everyday life. *Vedanta* philosophy is based upon a thesis that the metaphysical concepts of oneness and plurality view the society as an organism. A society is not a collection of individuals loosely joined by self interest but an integral unit like an organism made up of many different but interrelated and mutually dependent parts. Their interests are ameliorative and not antagonistic because they have basic needs and goals in common. Interdependence and harmony are therefore natural in this philosophy of *Vedanta*. It amounts to saying that each caste or group contributes to and receives from the whole. The good of one is tied up with the good of all. Thus, we can say that Swami Vivekananda was a saint in all ways engaged with the ideas of *Vedanta* which is the basic cultural *ontology* of this country.

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