

## Analyzing the philosophy of integral humanism in the discourse of Swami Vivekananda: Context, meaning and relevance

Dr. Chandni Sen Gupta

Assistant Professor of History, Department of History, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University Haryana, India

### Abstract

Humanism is a philosophy which stresses on social ethics and human values. It can be described as any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values and dignity are taken to be of primary importance. This paper aims to interpret and contextualize the humanistic thought of Swami Vivekananda vis á vis his philosophical discourse, his ideas of social regeneration and his notions of enlightened governance. His idea of humanism was essentially different from the Western concept of humanism which was scientific in nature. Swami Vivekananda's humanism was deeply rooted in Vedantic humanism, and followed a scheme wherein the sila (physical aspect), chitta (mental aspect) and prajna (intellectual pursuit of divine possibilities) were perfectly synthesized.

**Keywords:** philosophy, Humanism, contextualize, humanistic, philosophical

### Introduction

The philosophy of humanism aims at upholding the dignity of man by enhancing individual freedom and responsibility. It puts the human being at the centre stage. However, this philosophy does not allow the human being to abrogate from his universal responsibilities towards fellow human beings or beings in general. Therefore, the human being is the microcosm of all activities in the universe. This was the principal philosophy which governed the Renaissance in the West and accelerated the growth and development of humanistic traditions in the East. The central premise of this philosophical tenet is to establish a sense of equality among humans. However, it must be pointed out that the humanistic philosophy which was the guiding principle behind the Renaissance in the West was very different from the humanistic approach found in the thinking of Indian philosophers. In the context of India, humanism developed as a force of integration within the larger social structure rather than a mere gateway for individual salvation.

The notion of humanism found in the thought of Indian philosophers is based on a feeling of fellowship, that which constitutes the understanding of humanity's ultimate realization of itself and of the world in terms of attaining values that are universal and human. From the Vedic times to the present day, sages and social reformers have emphasized the need for realizing the universal purpose of fellowship. In the Bhagvad Gita, Lord Krishna is known to have expressed the principle of humanism within a broader context of explaining man's duty which must extend not only towards human beings but also towards the welfare of all living beings on earth.

The guiding philosophical influence on the concept of humanism in the Indian context was the philosophy of Vedanta which asserted the essential non-duality of God, soul and the universe. According to this philosophy, the apparent distinctions were created by names and forms, which from the standpoint of ultimate reality, do not exist. It was this philosophical narrative which provided the basis

for Swami Vivekananda's philosophical interventions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was one of the pioneers who vociferously articulated the idea of humanism in India.

### Integral Humanism in the Philosophical Discourse of Swami Vivekananda

The philosophical discourse of Swami Vivekananda is replete with examples of integral humanism. For analyzing the concept of humanism expounded by Swami Vivekananda, it is imperative to contextualize it within the framework of his a) philosophy, b) societal regeneration and c) political framework of the Indian state.



Fig 1

The philosophical context of humanism needs to be scrutinized in order to understand the broader framework of integral humanism espoused by Swami Vivekananda. The humanism of Swamiji was an attempt to establish order and unity within the human society at large. It was an attempt to integrate all human beings into a web of humanitarianism. Being greatly inspired by Vedantic philosophy, Swamiji placed man at the centre of the universe. Highlighting the Vedantic notion of humanism, Swami Vivekananda spoke eloquently about the divinity of man. The humanism expounded by Swamiji was intensely human and universal but it also went beyond, for it derived its strength and sanction from the ever-present and inalienable divine spark in all human beings.

The humanism of Swamiji was largely drawn from the philosophy of the Upanishads. Thousands of years ago, the Upanishads had investigated the science of man. The sages

who composed the Upanishads explored the inner nature of man. The idea of humanism enshrined in the Upanishads is best exemplified in a verse of the Kathopanishad (3.12):

*Esharbashubhuteshu gudhaatmanaprakashate*

*Drishyatetvagryayabuddhya sukhmayasukhma – darshabhih*

This verse means that the soul or *aatman* (infinite) is present in every being but lies hidden and, therefore, is not manifest but it can be realized by the subtle and penetrating reason of those who are trained to perceive subtlest of the subtle truths.

Drawing from this concept of the infinite being present in every human being, Swami Vivekananda articulated that “man is divine and all this which we see around us is the outcome of that consciousness of the divine.” According to Swamiji, “everything that is strong, and good, and powerful in human nature is the outcome of that divinity, and though potential in many, there is no difference between man and man essentially, all being alike divine. There is, as it were, an infinite ocean behind, and you and I are so many waves, coming out of that infinite ocean; and each one of us is trying his best to manifest that infinite outside. So, potentially, each one of us has that infinite ocean of existence, knowledge, and bliss as our birthright, our real nature; and the difference between us is caused by the greater or lesser power to manifest that divine <sup>[1]</sup>.

Swami Vivekananda’s humanism was, therefore, strengthened and sustained by the ignition of the divine spark in man. His idea of humanism was dynamic and universal and was based on the notion of man’s growth and evolution culminating in a steady process of realization of divine possibilities hidden within him. Thus, Swamiji’s concept of humanism bore a unique stamp of individual power and potentiality. In the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, humanism was to be the religion of man as man was the only species in nature fitted to strive for and realize the spiritual tendencies present within him.

At the philosophical level, Swamiji’s notion of humanism enunciated the centrality of the human being in all spheres of activity. This human being who was essentially divine in nature had the power to achieve anything provided he had the will to manifest his divinity. This notion of divinity within each individual was transported to the notion of freedom and love for the motherland in myriad ways in the philosophical interventions made by Swamiji. In his views, this divine flame within each individual could be used as a means to an end that is as a prime mover for attaining freedom both external (from the British Raj) and internal (from inner evils) wherein the two ‘freedoms’ complemented each other in a synthesized manner.

### **Societal Regeneration through Humanism**

The notion of humanism in the thought of Swamiji was an inclusive doctrine which not only dictated the course of his philosophy but also elucidated the practicality of humanism in terms of societal regeneration and the role of human beings in this process. For Swami Vivekananda, the practical manifestation of humanism was the service to man. According to him, service to humanity was the manifestation of the realization of the divinity in man. Its purpose was to integrate all human beings with the ultimate aim of attaining freedom of the individual and unity and progress of the nation. Swamiji believed that nation building

is impossible without ‘man-making.’ The process of ‘man-making’ according to him began and ended with the notion of service. A man, therefore, must work to ensure the welfare of other human beings along with his own, for the simple and obvious reason that social life involves interdependence. Therefore, man was the end as well as the means—as a means for the fulfillment of the ends of others i.e his fellow human beings. In a letter to the Maharaja of Mysore written in 1894, Swami Vivekananda made his point clear—“This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive <sup>[2]</sup>.

Swami Vivekananda’s concept of society, derived from Vedantic philosophy, sought to integrate both the material and spiritual interpretations of man and society. He sought to establish a continuum between society, culture and man in order to present an integral view of both man and society. He opined that man and society were two sides of the same coin and were not antithetical to each other. Vivekananda says, “Two attempts have been made in the world to found social life. The one was upon religion or spirituality or transcendentalism, and the other was upon social necessity or materialism or realism. The one looks beyond the horizon of the little material world, while the other is content to stand on things of the world and expects to find a firm footing there <sup>[3]</sup>.

In order to understand the notion of humanism in the societal context, it is important to analyze his views on Indian (Eastern) society as opposed to the Western social framework—the former being based on spiritualism while the latter being based on materialism. Within this broader context, Swamiji tried to place the Hindu man in the societal framework. He stressed that “the Western man is born individualistic while the Hindu is socialistic—entirely socialistic <sup>[4]</sup>. He believed that the goals of life are different in the West and in the East and consequently, the nature of social integration is also different. While in the West, the goal is individual independence, in the East the goal is *mukti* or salvation through renunciation. Therefore, Swami Vivekananda extolled the virtuosity of the Indian social organization which was based entirely on the humanistic principle of service to mankind.

Swamiji observed that in the Indian society there existed a problem of assimilation, and his humanistic approach was to work as an assimilative force in the society. He placed great responsibility on the shoulders of those who had received the blessings of education, culture and economic resources to spearhead the regeneration of Indian society. He wanted the ‘privileged’ elements in society to adopt a humanistic approach and make attempts to assimilate all those who could not enjoy the fruits of progress i.e. the poor and downtrodden. His concept of reform in Indian society revealed a systematic insight into the process and method of reform. He believed that people from different walks of life had to become stakeholders in the process of societal regeneration—administrators, politicians, intellectuals, and citizens. He propounded a unique type of revolution which was best suited to the Indian context. He spoke of steady evolution—that is the effecting of revolutionary social changes through social education and legislative action.

<sup>2</sup>Letters of Swami Vivekananda, 1960, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, p. 14

<sup>3</sup>The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. III, 1989, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, p. 156

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 62

<sup>1</sup>Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, online version, p.312

### Politics and Governance-A Humanistic Approach

Swami Vivekananda's humanism was not restricted to the philosophical and social sphere. It also incorporated the sphere of politics and governance which rendered to it an inclusive and holistic character. To understand his notion of humanism in the realm of politics and governance, it will be beneficial to look at four aspects discussed by Swamiji in detail—a) integral humanism and the concept of democracy, b) the role of citizens, c) the role of administrators, and d) justice and integral humanism.

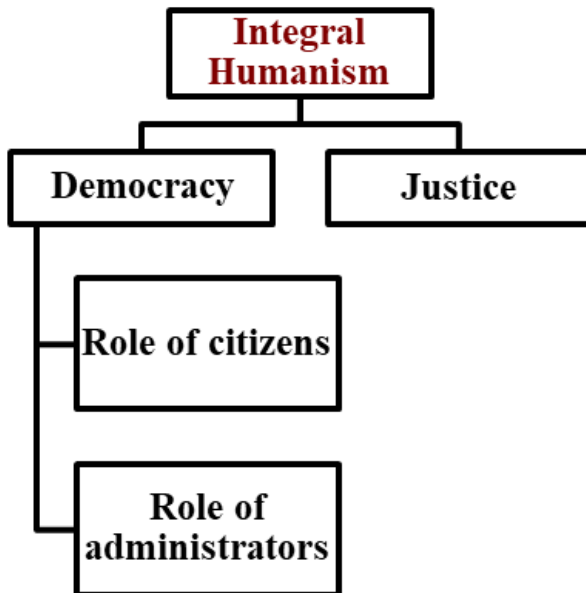


Fig 2

Swami Vivekananda's humanism was to be upheld by the two pillars of democracy—the citizens and the administrators. Before discussing the role of these groups, it would be helpful to understand Swami Vivekananda's notion of an ideal democracy. He expounded the democratic concept of public welfare based on the values of freedom and equality which sought to perform a grand humanistic task of striking a balance between differences among human beings to bring about harmony in society. For Swamiji, democracy was in essence a spiritual concept. According to him, freedom and equality which is the essence of democracy cannot be established merely by political and economic methods. For him, the urge for freedom and equality was essentially a spiritual urge. Therefore, if the spiritual aspect is not taken into consideration, only a superficial form of democracy could be attained – like in the West – in which unnecessary competition and materialism will drown the voices of spiritualism.

As far as the concept of citizenship is concerned, Swamiji was of the opinion that all citizens, belonging to all denominations had a role to play in the process of nation building. The work performed by each individual, according to Swamiji, was eventually transformed into service of the nation. He believed that from a shoe-maker to a housewife and from a white-collar professional to a politician, everyone had a role to play in the affairs of the state. Citizenship involves a sense of social responsibility and by performing his or her tasks, each individual could strive to become an effective citizen of the nation. In accordance with the philosophy of Vedanta, Swamiji contended that the

growth of man from the householder to the citizen is a spiritual process which transforms man from an egoistic being into an ethically aware individual.

The role of the citizens was complemented by the role of the administrators and here too Swami Vivekananda advocated a humanistic approach. He opined that the responsibility of the administrators towards society is much greater than that of ordinary citizens. This is because they are entrusted the task of managing the affairs of society. He opines that ensuring the welfare of the people must be the prime concern of all the administrators who must work of the interest of the society at large. According to him, the values of humanism and social justice must be intertwined with the principles of administration wherein the administrators are made to serve others efficiently, really and sincerely. Drawing upon the principles of the Bhagvad Gita, in which Sri Krishna instructs Arjuna to secure the welfare of his kingdom, Swamiji spoke about instilling a spirit of responsibility among the administrators who, like Arjuna, had been entrusted the task of securing the welfare of their kingdom. He advocated the practice of humanism for the administrators. According to his humanistic approach, the administrators were to cultivate an elevated sense of duty and an indomitable inner strength which would help them to take correct action.

He stressed on the need for energetic intervention in four spheres—a) the energy of vision, b) the energy of practical implementation, c) the energy of meditation, d) the energy of action. He believed that the action of administrators must be infused with a spirit of sympathy and compassion. In his view, the administrators must develop the quality of sympathy. He enunciated the notion of 'abstract sympathy' through which the administrators could feel the sufferings of the people in spite of being at a distance from them.

In his philosophical discourses, Swami Vivekananda spoke about justice as an essential element of humanism. Justice or *dharma*, according to Swamiji, was the cement which united man to man, to form the integrated structure of society. According to him, a polity is held together by the values of *dharma*. Swamiji believed that the more serious problems of human society could be resolved only by the spiritual values of *dharma* and not by the biological or genetic bonds.

### Conclusion

The humanistic approach of Swami Vivekananda's philosophy extends beyond the realm of philosophical discourse. It necessitates action in the sphere of social change and governance. His humanism is not akin to the notion of charity but draws from the ideals of service and enlightened self-interest wherein action or *karma* becomes the focal point of human existence. His humanism, based on Vedantic principles, adopts a practical approach and enables each individual to work for the larger good of the society.

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