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REVIEW ARTICLE

VIVEKANANDA'S VIEW ON CASTE

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ABSTRACT

Caste system is a peculiar feature of Indian society. Swami Vivekananda is full of praise for the original caste system but he strongly criticises the degenerated caste system of his time. In his writings he has highlighted the problems relating to the exploitation of the poor by the rich, of the weak by the strong, of the unprivileged by the privileged one, exploitation of the lower class by the so-called higher class and so on; and the resulting struggle, the need to save people from dehumanizing poverty and a host of similar other issues. Vivekananda considers priest-craft, untouchability etc. as the main evils of the degenerated caste system. Throughout his lifetime he preaches against these and tries to generate public consciousness against these evils.

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INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda, the great son of modern India is a multifaceted personality. Though a monk and a spiritual personality he does not turn off his eyes from the problems faced by Indian society. He extensively travels all over India and thereby acquaints himself with the social and economic conditions of the country. He tries to realise the root cause of India's wretched condition. He found two great evils in India: trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restrictions (Swami Vivekananda, 2004). Throughout his lifetime he tries to eradicate these evils from Indian society. Materials and methods: Vivekananda has not written any treatise on caste system, rather his views regarding these issues are sprinkled throughout his lectures and writings. In his writings he has highlighted the recurrent theme of the wrongs of the degenerated caste system of his time, problems relating to the exploitation of the poor by the rich, of the weak by the strong, of the unprivileged by the privileged one, exploitation of the lower class by the so-called higher class and so on; and the resulting struggle, the need to save people from dehumanizing poverty and a host of similar other issues.

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 very much from the latter.

There were four *Varnas*- *Brahmin*, *Kshtriya*, *Vaisya*, and *Sudra*. "This system of division into different *varnas*", Vivekananda explains, "is the stepping stone to civilization, making one rise higher and higher in proportion to one's learning and culture". The *Varna* classification was made on 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 '*jati*' and says that it is 'the first idea of creation'. Creation connotes variation or diversity (*vichitrata*), and '*jati* means 'creation' (Sil, Narasingha, 1984). 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" (Swami Vivekananda, 2004).

Vivekananda has firm conviction that in ancient India, castes were not really hereditary, but based on qualifications (Majumdar). Hence, if one acquires higher qualities, there is every chance of elevation to a higher status. In this connection he mentions the examples of *Vasistha*, an illegitimate son; *Vyasa*, the son of a fisherwoman; *Narada*, the son of a maid servant with uncertain parentage, and many others of like nature, attaining *Risihood* or becoming revered saints and sages (Ibid,p-366). 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

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passage of time, the vested interests arose and became powerful and the system degenerated into a closed society (Mital, 1979). Vivekananda is full of praise for the real and original caste system. He says, "Caste is a very good thing. Caste is the plan we want to follow. What caste really is, not one in a million understands" (Swami Vivekananda, 2004). He again says, caste is good. That is the only 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 (Swami Vivekananda, 2004).

An interesting observation made by Vivekananda on caste is 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". Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another. Otherwise, how did *Viswamitra* became a Brahmin and *Parasurama* a ksatriya? (Swami Vivekananda, 2004) 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 he who has killed 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 realisation of the noble ideal of spiritually enlightened man (Mital, 1979). 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 (Swami Vivekananda, 2004). 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 'levelling up'. He says that from the highest man to the lowest Pariah, everyone has to try and become the ideal Brahmin.

But the original caste system of India unfortunately degenerated in the course of time into a kind of rigid, cruel caste-ism 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 and so flexible,

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 (Majumdar). 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 so he is equally full of blame for the latter, degenerated, so called caste-ism 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 crystallised 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 (Swami Vivekananda, 2004).

Vivekananda considers priest-craft, untouchability etc. as the main evils of the degenerated caste system. Throughout his lifetime he preaches against these and tries to generate public consciousness against these evils. In his day to day activity we find a clear instance of violating this custom. In his wandering life as a monk he neither hesitates to drink water from an outcaste nor hesitates to share hubble-bubble with a low-caste people. He has eaten food of the poorest and humblest people whom no casteman (upper caste people) would condescend to touch, and he has accepted their hospitality with thankfulness (Prabuddha Bharata, 1972). He 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" (Majumdar, 2004).

About himself, 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 other cases, so also in 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.

Result and discussion: Though Vivekananda strongly criticises 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 mis-interpretation – perhaps intentional, perhaps not, of the real, original implications of the

caste system. He always is of 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, 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 non-sense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is – evolution of the old." (Swami Vivekananda, 2004) He says, 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 of the Advaita order, 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. Throughout his lifetime he tries to materialise the great gospel 'Jiva is Shiva' discovered by his Guru. His Guru, Sri Ramakrishna expresses the essence of Vedanta Philosophy in these three words. Vivekananda is against any form of privilege on the part of anybody. He says, if 'Jiva is shiva, i.e, if 'every living being is god', then, of course, everyone must be granted the same human rights. No privilege could be granted to anyone on ground of sex, creed, birth or wealth or on any other ground since everyone has the same potentiality to become great and good (Dasgupta, Santwana, 2009).

According to Vivekananda, evils like caste system (in the degraded form) and untouchability are obstacles to our national integrity. He publicly criticises and advocates against the prevalent caste system. He even supports inter-caste marriage to establish equality in the society for breaking the concept of privilege. To him, the prevalent caste system handicapped the Hindu society to progress. So, 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. According to him, caste is a social custom. He observes that the doctrine of caste in the 'Purusa Sukta' of Rg 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 realises 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 (Dasgupta, Santwana, 2004)

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