NATIONALISM: THE VIVEKANANDA WAY

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Abstract

Nationalism is a contested concept. It is used both positively and negatively to either unite a people or whip up jingoistic passions among people. In the context of India, nationalism holds a different connotation that defies all western categorizations as India is not a nation in the traditional sense of the term; rather it is a 'supranation' consisting of multiple nations. Culture plays the most vital role in uniting people in India having diverse races, religions, languages, ethnicities and life-styles and gives them a sense of togetherness. It was Vivekananda, who during the early years of nationalistic resurgence, gave India's quest for identity a definite direction by striving to revive the country's age old traditional values and inclusive cultural ethos. His efforts immensely helped in drawing the attention of the western world towards the unique aspects of India's cultural heritage. This paper would offer a politico-cultural view of Indian nationalism and specifically discuss Swami Vivekananda's contributions to enrich it.

Keywords: India, Nationalism, Culture, Vivekananda, Revival

Nationalism has many facets and interpretations. There possibly cannot be any universal definition of nationalism as it plays out differently in different countries depending upon the circumstances and historical context. Cultural nationalism commonly takes the form of national self-affirmation; it is a medium through which a people can acquire a clearer sense of its own identity through the consolidation of national pride and self-respect. Many countries of Europe have witnessed the intensified manifestation of cultural fervor during their nationalistic movements. India also fits into this category, where culture played a major role in fostering the bonding among the people during the anti-colonial struggle. In India, nationalism was formally acknowledged as the most vital force during the struggle for independence against the British, which also resulted in the emergence of India as a nation-

state. The theorists and academics following the Marxist tradition have portrayed nationalism not as a generic manifestation of consciousness of Indian people, but merely as part of the emotional outburst against the British during the struggle for independence. There can be no single theoretical explanation of nationalism of any particular country without reference to its history and the evolutionary process associated with the emergence of its cultural paradigms. The Marxian analysis fails to take into account the unique character of India as one of the most remarkable communities, even if non-cohesive, that had allowed diverse languages, cultures and traditions to not only co-exist, but thrive through their respective orientations. In this context, to examine the development of Indian nationalism, it is imperative to analyze the nature of Indian civilization and its evolution. The civilization of India did not take a linear path, but is the outcome of a confluence of various cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic traditions. Over the years of mutual fecundation, synthesis and challenge, Indian civilization has come to be characterized by diversity of culture, religion, language, race and caste groups. According to Rajni Kothari, "in the absence of a centralized political authority it was 'the Indian civilizational enterprise' which 'over the centuries achieved a remarkable degree of cohesion and held together different sub-systems in a continental-size society'." (Kothari, 1988:2223). Thus, the unifying force of Indian civilization was the acceptance of multi-culturality and linguistic diversity rather than a political ideology of regimentation. Moreover, it is wrong on the part of the theorists to proclaim that the British through their rule unified India as a cohesive political entity for the first time. India had existed as separate country for nearly two thousands of year, united by its geography and its culture. Politically also very large part of India have existed as single empire long before colonization by British. If we want to get too technical, British never ruled over whole of India. There were around 600 independent states within India which were independent kingdoms with which British had entered in to treaties. Also there were territories within India that were under control of countries like France and Portugal.

India is perhaps the only civilization that has not only survived the ordeals of history, but has rather successfully evolved into a modern nation-state. It boasts of a rich cultural heritage that dates back to thousands of years. In a way, India's identity is defined by its cultural ideals and spiritual norms that are most unique and universal. The immense diversities and differences among people that exist in India have not, in any way, deterred its journey as a nation. One of the most important factors that has helped India tackle all adversities,

dissensions and challenges, both domestic and external, and survive as a nation is the inherent sense of 'oneness'-that can be termed as 'Mahabharityata'- intrinsic to India's identity and ethos.   India, quite unlike other nation-states, is the harbinger of great civilizational ethos that dates back to thousands of years, much before the advent of civilization in the western world, that celebrates unity, amity, integration and co-existence among all despite innumerable differences and diversities. Indian Upanishads proclaimed Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as the guiding mantra that conceptualized the world as one single family; an organic whole where all are the same and all are one. They exhort us to see through the falsity of multiplicity and realize the inherent Oneness of the existence as the differences, separations and dichotomies that apparently confront us are nothing but like a virtual image in the mirror which though cannot be destroyed does not represent the reality. 'Vasudeva sarvam iti', asserts Bhagvad Gita signifying the oneness of all beings. Tamil Poet Kanian Poongundranar in a Poem written 2500 years ago wrote, "Yathum Oore Yavarum Kelir" - 'Every place is my home town; Everyone my kith and kin'.

Indian Nationalism: Cultural Regeneration

One of the most dangerous aspects of colonization was that it involved a conquest of the mind as well as the territory of India. From the very beginning the British depicted India as a fallen country, politically despotic, socially backward and religiously primitive and pagan. It followed that there was considered very little worth preserving, a premium being placed on a total reconstruction of India along 'civilized' European lines. To be reborn, India needed to be culturally destroyed first. When the British established their rule in India, they realized that colonization remains incomplete without the colonization of 'mind' and of the intellectual and cultural traditions of the people being colonized. The historical depth of the Indian civilization, the resilience of its plural character to accommodate and adapt to the new currents of westernization without loss to the basic cultural identities defeated the colonial cultural designs. Though the British innovations and institutionalizations in the fields of administration, education, judicial organizations, transport and communication, army and police services etc. contributed to the emergence of a new system of governance and state formation, it also contributed to the growth of a middle class in India which began to question the legitimacy of the British rule, on the one hand and, on the other, became acutely self-conscious of having been colonized by an alien power. This set into motion a series of reform movements ranging from revivalism of the ancient traditions to selective adaptive

accommodation of the western social, cultural and scientific values. While the nationalist movements and patriotic ideologies grew due to the consolidation of the cultural orientations of the people, the foreign rule in turn unconsciously triggered a cultural and intellectual renaissance in India. This was the environment in which a Hindu renaissance took root and eventually flourished. Manifested in three distinct forms - the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Movement - it not only countered the British criticism of Hindu culture but importantly turned it around, positioning the superiority of the Hindu East over the materialist West. In the process Hindu India was bequeathed a new sense of pride in its past and culturally primed to reinforce the nationalist challenge to British rule.

Vivekananda's Nationalism: Not Parochial, But Spiritual

Swami Vivekananda was the first cultural ambassador of India. It was he who introduced India to the western world through his evocative speeches and narrations. He presented an alternate image of India before the westerners, who until then, believed India to be a poor, illiterate country full of snake-charmers and dark magicians. Vivekananda's visit to the US was the best thing that happened at a juncture when the country's morale was at the lowest because of the colonial domination and complete subjugation-physical, social, psychological, cultural and emotional- of the people. Vivekananda, invited to represent the Hindu religion, delivered his first speech at the World Congress of Religions at Chicago on 11 September, 1893. This iconic speech highlighted not only the unique aspects of Hinduism but also the rich cultural traditions of India that had always stood for toleration, brotherhood, co-existence and harmony. Vivekananda harped on achieving unity among all religions of the world that would pave the way for greater unity among the people of the world. He urged to shun all forms of sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism. Most notably, while elucidating the virtues of Indian spiritualism, he drew attention to the distinctive characteristics of India as a nation that had always embraced all cultures, nationalities and ideas, amalgamating them to one organic whole. Vivekananda said in his speech:

> I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was

shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: 'As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.' The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world, of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: 'Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.' Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.[1]

This speech, delivered more than hundred years ago, still remains the best exposition -as well as defence- on Hinduism and Indian nationalism. It continues to guide our thought and action as we move into next phase of globalization in 21st century.

Vivekananda's nationalism was not jingoistic or aggressive but was rather deeply cultural and spiritual. He contributed immensely to the growth of nationalism during the colonial era by focussing on the development of an organic non-western discourse through his writings and speeches. He said, "Each nation has a destiny to fulfil, each nation has a message to deliver, each nation has a mission to accomplish. Therefore we must have to understand the mission of our own race, the destiny it has to fulfil, the place it has to occupy in the march of nations, the role which it has to contribute to the harmony of races".[2] 'Humanism' and

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[1] Swami Vivekananda's Speech at the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893 available at
https://belurmath.org/swami-vivekananda-speeches-at-the-parliament-of-religions-chicago-1893/

[2] https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=114532

'Universalism', according to Vivekananda, were the two most cardinal aspects of India's spiritual traditions that must form the basis of nationalism. Nationalism, thus, should never be exclusivist or parochial, but rather espouse love and fraternity. He strongly supported the nationalist movement and criticized the British regime for its exploitative and anti-people policies. He exhorted, "Each nation has a destiny to fulfil, each nation has a message to deliver, each nation has a mission to accomplish. Therefore we must have to understand the mission of our own race, the destiny it has to fulfil, the place it has to occupy in the march of nations, the role which it has to contribute to the harmony of races".[3]

Vivekananda's ideas motivated thinkers like Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi in later years who pursued the goal of national regeneration through espousing spiritual nationalism. Taking cue from Swami Vivekanand's notion of 'spiritual nationalism', Aurobindo emphasized that nationalism could not be a just an ideological tool to defeat the alien ruler, but rather it had a strong spiritual component attached to the rich cultural heritage and traditions of India as a nation. He wrote:

> "Physical expansion proceeds from a desire for spiritual expansion and history also supports the assertion. But why should not India then be the first power in the world? Who else has the undisputed right to extend spiritual sway over the world? This was Swami Vivekananda's plan of campaign. India can once more be made conscious of her greatness by an overmastering sense of the greatness of her spirituality. This sense of greatness is the main feeder of all patriotism." (Ghose, 1965:135).

In fact, the cultural aspect of nationalism became more prominent during the British rule making them realize their inherent unity despite all kinds of diversity and plurality. Culture, in the form of traditional values, principles and symbols, provided the common platform to the nationalist citizens to come together and fight for their political sovereignty. It was in the field of culture that the idea of nationalism was expressed first. This happened at two levels:

• Firstly it happened by attempting to bring about reforms in it by removing some undesirable feature of Indian culture like caste system, religious superstitions, priesthood, discrimination against women etc.

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[3] https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=114532

• Secondly, an attempt was also made by the Indians to oppose the British encroachment in the Indian culture.

'Satyagraha' that was the principal method of Indian national movement against British rule, in a way, was inspired by Vivekananda's teachings. Vivekananda was the harbinger of Indian nationalism, driving generations of Indians towards asserting their identity.

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