

# 'Ideal Society' as Envisaged by Swami Vivekananda

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Locating Swami Vivekananda within the Renaissance in India in general, and Bengal in particular, needs no scrutiny. His life and the influential factors for the formation of his thought are deep and worth studying over and over again. In reading about him written by himself, by others close to him and other writers I have found his 'Ideal Society' to be a fascinating subject. Hence, I shall attempt in my own short-sighted view to understand and analyse what Vivekananda hinted at through his concept of 'Ideal Society'. I shall also try to find out if this concept of society was really envisaged by Vivekananda, or it was just a figure of speech pervading some of his most important messages. Or, to go further, taking Hiltrud Rustau's approach, I shall try to explore whether the concept of 'Ideal Society' is of a sketchy character.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Ideal Society', to be understood, first and foremost, has to begin with the Practical Vedanta. Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta has the characteristic of a two-dimensional theory. His Practical Vedanta can be rendered and understood both as an abstract as well as concrete, spiritual and, at the same time, societal. In fact, Vivekananda can be named, in Rustau's term, 'the first among Indian philosophers from whom social philosophy constituted an integral part of his philosophical system.'<sup>2</sup> He continues to say that Vivekananda was also the first in the history of Indian philosophy, who, at

least in rough outlines drew the picture of the 'Ideal Society'.<sup>3</sup> He was also, according to Rustau, the first Indian to develop a social utopia.<sup>4</sup>

## Analysis of the 'Ideal Society' as envisaged by Vivekananda

There are two difficult hurdles in attempting to bring about an understanding of Vivekananda's concept of 'Ideal Society'. One, Vivekananda practically scattered his views and ideas of his concept of the 'Ideal Society' throughout his writings. Two, many of Vivekananda's biographers or followers did not extensively deal upon his concept of 'Ideal Society'. Nonetheless, some of the biographers have shown that such a society was envisaged by Vivekananda, and this can be seen in the minimal exposition of Vivekananda's view about society. Among the biographers of Vivekananda, Abraham Stephen, Hiltrud Rustau and V. Brodov have, in contrast to the other biographers, extensively dealt with this ideal. In addition to these writers, attempt will also be made to study the exposition of this concept by other biographers, who mentioned this concept, if not directly. Hence, the analysis of the 'Ideal Society' undertaken in this study are heavily based on the utterances and writings of Vivekananda himself, and also the writings of his biographers.

It can be assumed that, in order to understand and analyse Vivekananda's

‘Ideal Society’, an attempt at defining and interpreting the meaning of ‘ideal’ would serve our purpose. ‘Ideas’ and ‘ideals’ are two important words that are interconnected and, invariably both the terms have some similarity of meaning. In simple usage, an *idea* can mean the content of cognition, an intention. On the other hand, *ideal* can mean a mental image or conception of something wished for, something one wishes to attain. However, an ideal is usually presented in abstract terms while ideas may become ideal and are usually presented as concept or form.<sup>5</sup> An ideal, therefore, could be a concept, which one hopes to attain or realize.

Having understood the term *ideal*, now endeavour would be to study how Vivekananda understood *society*. V. K. Arora vividly summarizes Vivekananda’s understanding of society as well as its features thus:

Society is a Divine creation, an aggregate of different individuals, with religion as the backbone. Its features are essentiality of self-sacrifice for well-being, gradual transition to being ‘one’ with the society, and the final result of human relations, co-operatively shared happiness.<sup>6</sup>

We can derive from this quotation an important aspect of Vivekananda’s understanding of society, which is individualistic and socialistic. Moreover, religion, or in other words, spirituality plays a major part in it. Societies should be, says Vivekananda, moulded upon Truth, and Truth has not to adjust itself to society.<sup>7</sup> For Vivekananda, the progress of human society must be informed and directed by sensitiveness to spiritual values.<sup>8</sup> He also believes that every society has its own rise and fall. He says:

The history of nations is like that: they rise

and they fall; after the rise comes a fall, again out of the fall comes a rise, with greater power. This motion is always going on. In the religious world the same movement exists. In every nation’s spiritual life, there is a fall as well as a rise.<sup>9</sup>

### Analysis of ‘Ideal Society’

This gives one the impression of the way in which Vivekananda understood society in particular and nation in general. With such a view in mind, we shall move on towards analysing the ‘Ideal Society’. The starting-point to understand this would be to understand caste as explained by Vivekananda. In order to simplify it, Vivekananda divided society into two castes—the higher caste (Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya) and the lower caste (Shudra). He justifies his contention by saying that in the history of the world, the three upper castes had, in succession, ruled the society. It would be relevant to quote Vivekananda himself:

Human society is in turn governed by the four castes—the priests, the soldiers, the traders, and the labourers. . . . The priests (Brahmins) cultivate the mind, for through the mind they govern. The military (Kshatriya) rule is tyrannical and cruel, but they are not exclusive; and during that period arts and social culture attain their height. The commercial (Vaishya) rule comes next. It is awful in its silent crushing and blood-sucking power. Its advantage is, as the trader himself goes everywhere, he is a good disseminator of ideas, . . . but culture begins to decay. Last will come the labourer (Shudra) rule. Its advantages will be the distribution of physical comforts,—its disadvantages (perhaps) the lowering of culture. There will be a great distribution of ordinary education, but extraordinary geniuses will be less and less.<sup>10</sup>

He views that all the three upper castes

had their turn. And now, it was the turn of the Shudras to have their rule in society. He opines that the other rules had been experienced, but found unsatisfactory; and it was a time for the Shudras to have their turn, if for nothing else, for the novelty of the thing.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore in this context that Vivekananda envisaged the ‘Ideal Society’. But, the ‘Ideal Society’, as envisaged by him, was not having a choice of any of the periods mentioned, instead, the summation of all the four periods. Thus, Vivekananda says:

If it is possible to form a state in which the knowledge of the priest period, the culture of the military, the distributive of the commercial, and the ideal equality of the last can all be kept intact, minus their evils, it will be an ideal state.<sup>12</sup>

### **Importance of caste**

This is indicative of the fact that Vivekananda was conscious of the presence of caste, and also its importance. His ‘Ideal Society’ was based on caste. But, for him, caste, which is opposed to the Vedanta philosophy, is a social custom, the outgrowth of political institutions and a hereditary trade guild.<sup>13</sup> For Vivekananda, in his concept of the ‘Ideal Society’, there will exist only one caste, for the lower will be raised to the level of the higher.<sup>14</sup> That is, all the castes will be elevated to the highest level of the Brahmin. It also gives the impression that the society should try to overcome the lapses of the four periods of the past, yet preserve the advantages of each period. The ideal at one end is the Brahmin and at the other is the Chandāla, and the whole work is to raise the Chandāla to the status of the Brahmin.<sup>15</sup>

Vivekananda argues that the knowledge of Sanskrit would be the best way to level up caste distinctions.<sup>16</sup> To this, he adds that

‘Brahminhood’ is the ideal of humanity in India.<sup>17</sup> He further explains this ideal saying that it refers to the Brahmin of spiritual culture and renunciation, the Brahmin-ness in which worldliness is absent and true wisdom is abundantly present.<sup>18</sup> In his ‘Ideal Society’ Vivekananda asserts that there will be no space for privileges of force, wealth, intelligence, birth or spirituality.<sup>19</sup>

Within this concept of ‘Ideal Society’ Vivekananda also envisioned the indispensable presence of ideal men and ideal women. He says,

Rāma, the ancient idol of the heroic ages, the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal father, and above all, the ideal king. . . . Sitā is unique. . . . She is the very type of the true Indian woman, for all the Indian ideals of a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of Sitā . . . purer than purity itself, all patience, and all suffering. She, who suffered that life of suffering without a murmur, she the ever-chaste and ever-pure wife, she the ideal of the people, the ideal of the gods, the great Sitā. . . . The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sitā, and that is the only way.<sup>20</sup>

Here is an indication that Vivekananda’s concept of the ‘Ideal Society’ gives a call to build a society in the tradition of ancient India, where the qualities similar to those manifested by Rāma and Sitā, his models, would be evident. Thus the Swami tried to lay a foundation of the Indian society based on Hindu morality<sup>21</sup> using religion as the impelling force. Moreover, the ‘Ideal Society’ has to realize the ideal of oneness.

It should be mentioned, however, that Vivekananda also says that the combination of the Greek mind represented by the external European energy added to the Hindu spirituality would help form an ideal Indian society.<sup>22</sup> Vivekananda firmly

believes that although religion is the sole interest of the people of India,<sup>23</sup> she has to learn from Europe the conquest of external nature, while Europe has to learn from India the conquest of inner nature. When that takes place, there will be no Hindus or Europeans—there will be an ideal humanity.<sup>24</sup> To this Vivekananda also adds that the ideal society would be the one in which the Indian idea of spiritual integrity and the Western idea of social progress would be synthesized.<sup>25</sup> By the Western idea of social progress, he, it seems, understood social liberty, democracy, and a dose of materialism.<sup>26</sup> He pinpoints this need in the following words:

What we should have is what we have not, perhaps what our forefathers even had not—that which the Yavanas had; that, impelled by the life-vibration of which, is issuing forth in rapid succession from the great dynamo of Europe, the electric flow of that tremendous power vivifying the whole world. . . . We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self-reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement.<sup>27</sup>

### Social westernization

These were the qualities Vivekananda wanted for his ‘Ideal Society’. Yet, we must remember that he was against social westernization. He said India should grow according to her traditions.<sup>28</sup> He said reform is not the answer, but the growth on national lines.<sup>29</sup>

But is such ‘Ideal Society’ possible? Vivekananda did not give a direct answer. Yet, in his attempts to realize his ‘Ideal Society’ he brings forth valuable suggestions that he thought would be adequate to realize what he envisaged. He demanded the practical realization of oneness by having faith in oneself, self-confidence, compassion for one’s fellow beings and tolerance.<sup>30</sup> This oneness, the essential ideal of Neo-Vedanta,<sup>31</sup> is what Vivekananda desired as the first step. Secondly, he felt that elevation of the masses<sup>32</sup> was another step needed for the realization of the ‘Ideal Society’. He also stated that the spirit of equality, freedom, work, and energy should be ensured without hurting the religious beliefs of the masses. The masses are to be given their lost individuality. They are to be educated.<sup>33</sup> When they will be educated, Vivekananda believes, they will identify the agents of social oppression and understand the hollowness of the so-called superiority of birth claimed by the high castes. As mentioned earlier, Vivekananda did not believe that caste system was part of religion; in fact, he wanted people to know that it was a social system necessary to maintain stability.<sup>34</sup> The third step that Vivekananda suggested is the application of religious ideals into society.<sup>35</sup> He did not, however, forget to mention that religion should be kept within its proper limits and that must give freedom to society in order to grow.<sup>36</sup> ■

### REFERENCES

- 1 Hiltrud Rustau, ‘Swami Vivekananda’s Ideal Society and its Impact on Govind Chandra Dev’ in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, edited by William Radice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 264-280. Hereafter Rustau,
- 2 Rustau, ‘Vivekananda’s Ideal Society’ in *Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. Radice, pp. 264-280. Rustau argues that in spite of the influence of Vedanta on Raja Ram

- Mohan Roy and Ramakrishna Paramahansa, they were not able to develop a social philosophy proper in the sense of systematically philosophizing on social problems. He argues that Vivekananda was the first to connect the new interpretation of Vedanta with the development of social philosophy that corresponded to the requirements of modern society. He continues to argue that Vivekananda took over Shankara’s concept of the sole existence of Brahman and Māyā; and the main intention of Vivekananda in using the concept of Shankara was that Vivekananda wanted to use philosophy in a more practical sense.
- 3 Ibid.
  - 4 Ibid.
  - 5 Ripusudan Prasad Srivastava, *Contemporary Indian Idealism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p. 7.
  - 6 V. K. Arora, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1968), p. 62. Hereafter, Arora, *Social and Political Philosophy*.
  - 7 *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. II, p. 84. Hereafter, *Complete Works*.
  - 8 G. R. S. Rao, ‘Vivekananda’s Socio-Political Relevance’ in *Perspectives on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta Tradition*, edited by M. Sivaramkrishna & Sumita Roy (Hyderabad: Sterling Publishers, 1991), pp. 198-203. Hereafter, *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta*, eds., Sivaramkrishna & Roy.
  - 9 *Complete Works*, Vol. IV, p. 120.
  - 10 Ibid., Vol. VI, pp. 380-381. Vivekananda commented that of the modern Western nations, the Vaishya attained the greatest success in Great Britain. *Complete Works*, Vol. IV, p. 450.
  - 11 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 382.
  - 12 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 381. It is important to note that this ideal was part of the letter sent by Swami Vivekananda to Miss Mary Hale, when he was still in London. The letter is dated, London, England, 1 November, 1896. See *Complete Works*, Vol. IV, p. 378.
  - 13 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 311.
  - 14 Rustau, ‘Vivekananda’s Ideal Society’ in *Modernization of Hinduism* ed. Radice, pp. 264-280.
  - 15 *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 295.
  - 16 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 291.
  - 17 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 293.
  - 18 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 197.
  - 19 Rustau, op. cit., pp. 264-280.
  - 20 *Complete Works*, Vol. III, pp. 255-256.
  - 21 Stephen, *Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, p. 127.
  - 22 *Complete Works*, Vol. V, p. 216.
  - 23 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 178. To this, Vivekananda also adds that the lifeline of well-being in India is to follow the track of religion, p. 179.
  - 24 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 216.
  - 25 Swami Vivekananda, *Caste, Culture and Socialism* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1947), p. vi.
  - 26 *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 157.
  - 27 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 404.
  - 28 As quoted in Arora, *Social and Political Philosophy*, p. 76.
  - 29 *Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 197.
  - 30 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 190.
  - 31 Stephen, *Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, p. 123.
  - 32 *Complete Works*, Vol. V, p. 29.
  - 33 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 307.
  - 34 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 132.
  - 35 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 47.
  - 36 Ibid., Vol. V, p. 22.

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