

Swami Vivekananda's Perceptions of History : Beyond Marx (I)

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Before entering into any serious analysis of Swami Vivekananda's insights into the unfolding of human socio-cultural history in general, and the Indian history, in particular, let us take a quick look into the deterministic and premeditated approach to the analysis of the history of the Asiatic societies of the 19th century by Karl Marx, when he was presenting the apocalyptic gospels in the forms of *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital : Critique of Political Economy* (1867).

Marxism, in its core and motive, is essentially a European current of political thinking, and as such, the Marxian ontology constitutes a response to the problems of social evolution in the 'advanced capitalist' countries of the West during his times, and, until Lenin's ascendancy as the main architect of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in the Tsarist Russia (a revolution quite contrary to the classical Marxist predictions based on his pet materialistic interpretation of history in a dialectical fashion as per the 'diktat' of Marx and his intellectual partner, Engels), there had been no serious attempts, among the Marxist ideologues including Karl Marx himself, to carve out a way by which the revolutionary struggle should be carried on within the non-European agrarian societies.

Human imagination, however, even at its best and the most enlightened, tends to

fall far short of the reality especially so in the case of Social Science in which attempts have been made at deterministic conceptualisations styled as 'theories' like those in Physical Sciences. Marxian historicism in its attempt to *guide* the future unfolding of the history of human society as a whole is also insufficient and unreal as it does not go beyond the space-time limit of Marx's own contemporary European 'modes of production' and 'relations of production'. The future state of human knowledge which would guide the patterns of future human societies cannot be foreseen by any contemporary wishful predictions. The logic of historical inevitability is based on a misreading of history itself. If history at all unfolds its patterns, then it does so differently to different philosophers of history. Laws of history are simply attempts to read the observers' private preferences on the plane of history. Universalisation of such private opinions may be necessary for a political ideology, but that cannot validate 'the scientific theories' of Karl Marx.

Now, how can one explain the limitations in the Marxist thought patterns insofar as his 'unhistorical' generalizations about the Asiatic historical developments are concerned?

As one born in the cradle of the European civilization, Karl Marx cannot but be 'subjective' in his analyses of his contemporary social and economic

questions. And when he turned to make an inquiry into the social and economic developments of the non-European social systems, his subjectivity came to suffer rather badly from an acute analytical opacity. Thus, a major contradiction in Marxian discourses on the non-European countries lies between his quite narrow europocentrism on the psycho-somatic level and worldwide vision on the strategic level of a social revolution.

Western 'superiority'

It seems that Marx, like his contemporaries, who always thought of the Western superiority as an inexorable fact of human history, was not prepared to concede to the non-European countries the role of conscious actors in history in order to become the masters of their own destinies and not to remain mute objects of a history, shaped and reshaped by the Whites. And Marx's attitude towards the Asiatic civilizations is nowhere typically more Western than when he dilates on the Indian history in particular. As regards the Asiatic civilizations, in general, Marx opined that those were not only qualitatively different from the European civilization but decisively *inferior*. He held the view that the Asian economic and social system was invariably marked by a peculiarly crude '*Asiatic Mode of Production*', a term which he conveniently used just in order to fit well within his analytical framework. The two basic syndromes of this so-called Asiatic Mode of Production, according to Marx, are (1) a simplistic economic structure erected on the foundation of a cluster of small village communities insulated from one another and tied to the primitively crude agrarian system; and (2) at the top of this economic structure is the 'despotic state'

which appropriated major portion of the surplus produced from largely autarkic and generally undifferentiated village communities through a hierarchy of petty officials, who had also the responsibility for organizing the construction and maintenance of irrigation system indispensable for the functioning of such an economy.¹

Taking the institution of private property as one of the basic criteria which marked off the European society as a more advanced system, Marx concluded that the absence of this institution in the Asiatic societies formed one of the cornerstones of the 'Oriental Despotism'. Even writing in 1853, Marx persisted in declaring that the Asiatic society with its peculiar mode of production was at the very primary stage of human civilization—that of a primitive *promiscuous* society and that *Asia fell asleep in history*, and he hurriedly concluded that the mass of the Asian humanity was hopelessly beyond redemption, except, of course, without Western intervention through artificially enforcing *progressive* reforms. Unfortunately, Marx failed wilfully(?) to perceive that the socio-economic formations of pre-capitalist Asia did not fundamentally differ from those of feudal Europe. Notwithstanding the fact that Marx had enough information about the landed property system in ancient China, he insistently marked China as a classical example of Oriental Despotism, and was not prepared to characterize her as a 'peculiar Asiatic form of production', a claim which Communist China put forth at a later stage.² In designating the whole Asiatic socio-economic formations as Asiatic Mode of Production which resulted in Oriental Despotism, Marx contradicted himself when he blared that the history of *all* hitherto existing society is the history of

class struggles, freemen and slaves, Patricians and Plebians, Barons and Serfs, Guild-masters and Journeymen, in one word, oppressor and, oppressed, standing constantly in opposition to each other, carried on in an uninterrupted warfare, now open, now concealed. How is it possible that when, according to Marx, there was no class system in the Asiatic primitive *promiscuous* societies, the Asiatic history is one of class struggle, too?

Marxist polemics

Now, let us turn to the Marxist *polemics* about the Indian society and civilization. In two articles entitled 'The British Rule in India' and 'The Future Results of British Rule in India' written on 10 June and 22 July 1853 for the *New York Daily Tribune*, and also in a letter to his long-time intellectual associate, Engels on 14 June 1853, Marx elaborately developed his pet themes of 'Asiatic Mode of Production' and 'Oriental Despotism'. Describing the Indian society as having 'an ancient form of civilization', Marx ejaculated:

We must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental Despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules. . . . We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindusthan. We must not forget . . . that they transformed a self-developing social state into neverchanging natural destiny, and thus

brought about a brutalising worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey and Sabbala, the cow.³

His historicism even could not visualize that a socialist revolution (Bolshevik upheaval under the leadership of Lenin and his city-bred comrades) was to shake the Tsarist Russia, which, according to them, like India and, China, was a crude 'Asiatic system' of 'savage and barbaric formations, characterised by communal property as the means of production'. It has already been suggested that the works of Marx and Engels contain only sclerotic analyses on the historical developments in the non-European societies. This was largely because of the fact that both of them had been exclusively preoccupied with the growing capitalist contradictions in the European capitalist system, in the conceptualization of which most of their energy and wisdom were consumed.

In fact, while characterizing the social history of India, Marx marked the 19th century as the starting-point. He was abominably unhistorical in telescoping the history of the thousands of years of Indian civilization into the 19th century social scenario. And herein comes the relevance of the highly penetrating insights into the history of human civilization, in general, and that of India, in particular.

Vivekananda's study of history

In 1853 Marx was writing in the *New York Daily Tribune* and Swami Vivekananda was born ten years later on 12 January 1863. During the formative period of his academic career and beyond he was always an avid reader of the world history and the Indian and Western philosophical thoughts.

Although there is no unimpeachable evidence that Swamiji had gone through *Das Kapital and Communist Manifesto* during his hectic sojourns throughout India and frequent trips to America and Europe, he was otherwise well acquainted with the sizzling speeches and writings of the firebrand revolutionaries of Europe. In fact, Sister Nivedita, who accompanied him during his second visit to the West, introduced him to some of the revolutionaries and socialist and anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin (the exponent of Anarchist political thinking), who was living in exile. Vivekananda met him in Paris in August 1900 and exchanged views with him regarding the prevailing Indian socio-political situation. He also met Edward Carpenter and a host of other Social Democrats in London. Swamiji was also well-informed of the political views of Bakunin, a leading Anarcho-socialist personality of Russia. But it appeared later that revolutionary ideas did not influence him in a significant manner as may be discerned from his exhaustive writings and speeches on the Vedantic egalitarian conceptualizations.⁴

The fact that Swami Vivekananda was an Indian in the truest sense of the term never precluded him from maintaining great objectivity in his analyses of the world history, in general, and the Indian history, in particular. First, he sought to challenge obnoxious notions of the Western writers about India. His historicity was quite contrary to the deterministic apocalypse of either Hegel or Marx. At the same time, he did not offer any systematic approach to the study of history. But from the voluminous writings, speeches and epistolary exchanges even within the short span of life it may be possible to piece together his own

interpretations of the history of human society.

Lashing out at the biased and subjective writings by the Western scholars on the Indian civilization, Swamiji writes that 'I used to read books written by globe-trotting travellers, especially foreigners, who deplored the ignorance of the Eastern masses. . . .'⁵ Again, in a disgusting manner he writes that 'To many, Indian thought, Indian manners, Indian customs, Indian philosophy, Indian literature are repulsive at the first sight; but let them persevere, let them read, let them become familiar with the great principles underlying these ideas, and it is ninety-nine to one that the charm will come over them and fascination will be the result'.⁶

Making a random sampling of the world history, Swamiji comments that 'civilisations have arisen in other parts of the world. In ancient times and in modern times, great ideas have emanated from strong and great races . . . but mark you, my friends, it has always been with the blast of war trumpets and with the march of embattled cohorts. Each idea had to be soaked in a deluge of blood. . . . This, in the main, other nations have taught. . . .'⁷

Turning to the soul and the spirit of the Indian civilization. Swamiji observed that ' . . . India has for thousands of years peacefully existed. Here activity prevailed when even Greece did not exist, when Rome was not thought of, when the very fathers of modern Europeans lived in forests and painted themselves blue. Even earlier, when history has no record, and tradition dares not peer into the gloom of that intense past, even from then until now, ideas after ideas have marched out from her, but every word has been spoken with a blessing behind it and peace before it. We, of all nations of the

world, have never been a conquering race, and that blessing is on our head, and therefore we live.'⁸

Steadfast in his perception of India as 'the *Punya Bhumi*, the land of Karma', he declares that 'if there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *Punya Bhumi*, to be the land to which souls on this earth must come to account for Karma, the land to which every soul that is wending its way Godward must come to attain its last home ... the land of introspection and spirituality—it is India. ...'⁹

While making a comparison between the early European civilization and the Indian, Swamiji sarcastically remarks that 'the European civilisation may be likened to a piece of cloth, of which these are the materials: its loom is a vast temperate hilly country on the sea-shore; its cotton, a strong warlike mongrel race formed by the intermixture of various races, its warp is warfare in defence of one's self and one's religion. The one who wields the swords is great, and the one who cannot, gives up his independence and lives under the protection of some warrior's sword. Its hoof is commerce. The means to this civilisation is the sword; its auxiliary—courage and strength; its aim—enjoyment here and hereafter.'¹⁰

Challenging the views of Western scholars about the Aryans, the original inhabitants of India, Swamiji blares that '... what your European Pandits say about the Aryan's swooping down from some foreign land, snatching away the lands of the aborigines and settling in India by exterminating them, is all pure nonsense; foolish talk! Strange, that our Indian scholars, too, say amen to them; and all these monstrous lies are being taught to our

boys! This is very bad indeed.'¹¹

On the contrary, he says with the authority of a historian, that whenever the Europeans find an opportunity, they exterminate the aborigines and settle down in ease and comforts on their lands. With this sort of mindset, they think that the Aryans must have resorted to the same line of action. Swamiji retorted that 'the Westerners would be considered wretched vagabonds if they lived in their native homes depending wholly on their own internal resources, and so they have to run wildly about the world seeking how they can feed upon the fat of the land of others by spoliation and slaughter; and therefore they conclude the Aryans must have done the same! But where is your proof? Guess-work? Then keep your fanciful guesses to yourselves!'¹²

According to Swamiji, the Aryans were lovers of peace, cultivators of the soil and were quite happy and contented if they could only rear their families undisturbed. In such a life they had ample leisure, and therefore greater opportunity of being thoughtful and civilized.

Hailing the great Aryan civilization in ancient India Swamiji writes:

The loom of the fabric of Aryan civilisation is a vast, warm, level country, interspersed with broad, navigable rivers. The cotton of this cloth is composed of highly civilised, semi-civilised and barbarian tribes, mostly Aryan. Its warp is *Varnashramachara*, and its woof, the conquest of strife and competition in nature.¹³

In the true spirit of the Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda sought to drive home the inner connotation of the word *Hindu*. For him, the word, Hindu had lost all its meaning, for this word merely meant those who lived on the

other side of the river Indus (in Sanskrit, Sindhu). According to him, this word was ‘murdered’ into Hindu by the ancient Persians, and all the people living on the other side of the river Sindhu were called by them Hindus. He further observes that ‘there may not be any harm in using the word of course; but as I have said, it has lost all its significance, for you may mark that all the people who live on this side of the Indus in modern times do not follow the same religion as they did in ancient times. The word, therefore, covers not only the Hindus proper, but Mohammedans, Christians, Jains and other people who live in India. I, therefore, would not use the word Hindu. . . . The other word which alone we can use are either the Vaidikas, followers of the Vedas, or better still, the Vedantists, followers of Vedanta’.¹⁴

Swamiji observes that most of the great religions on earth owe their allegiance to certain scriptures which, they believe, are the oracles of God sent into the world through certain messengers of God Himself. But, according to the Indian belief, the Vedas are *apaurusheya*—they do not owe their origins to anybody, being eternal—the knowledge of God. The Vedanta, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the transmuted and sublimated essence of the highest spiritual thinking on earth. The nucleus of the Vedanta is the *Prasthānatraya*—the Upanishads, the *Brahmasutra* and the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The very spirit of the Vedanta is *samadarshana*, which, in its essence, is spiritual equality—everybody and everything belong to Brahman (*sarvam khalvidam Brahma*).¹⁵

The religion of Vedanta

‘The grandest idea’, according to Swamiji, ‘in the religion of the Vedanta is

that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths I have generalised into four, viz those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge. . . .’¹⁶ Thus, though the diverse religions preach different rituals and praxis the goal is only one. The *Rigveda* solemnly affirms that ‘*ekam sadviprā vahudhā vadanti*’.

While reaffirming that the Vedanta—the end of the Vedas—the gist and the goal of the Vedas, is eternal, Swamiji takes a down-to-earth level approach by stepping down from the metaphysics of the Vedanta in order to elucidate the practical aspects of the Hindu religion. In this respect, he refers to the Smritis, which, he concedes, might have been composed by different sages on different occasions, and which constitute the manners and customs of the Indian society. These Smritis were always subject to modifications and additions. Swamiji explains that ‘We read that such and such Smriti should have authority in the Satya Yuga, such and such in the Tretā Yuga, some in the Dwāpara Yuga, and some in the Kali Yuga, and so on . . . and these Smritis, as mainly regulating the manners and customs of the nation, had also to be changed from time to time. But the principles of religion that are in the Vedanta are unchangeable.’¹⁷

In Swamiji’s view, Vedanta had not been merely a philosophy of the Rishis and discerning philosophers, but the key factor in the advance of human civilization. Swamiji’s concept of *creation* and *evolution* of human civilization was principally based on the metaphysics of the Vedantic school. He subscribes to the philosophy of *Māyā*. According to his view, time, space and causation are relevant only to the phenomenal world. ■

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