

## Swami Vivekananda and Humanism : Moments of Convergence and Divergence

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**H**umanism, a philosophical doctrine and life stance, has many variations. It has been cast and re-cast time and again in diverse shapes by different intellectual movements and thinkers. Nevertheless, the core ethical paradigm has remained more or less unaltered. In essence, all varieties of humanism, as evident from the term itself, express an overwhelming concern for well-being of the human species. Also cardinal to all forms of humanism is the belief that ‘man must resolve his problems alone and that there is no reality, above or beyond or outside of man’<sup>1</sup>.

For these fundamental principles all strands of humanism are considered to be anthropocentric. Though concern for humankind was vital to all cultures across the globe, humanism emerged as a significant philosophical tradition and flourished in different forms in the West. Two of its most dominant strands, Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism, crystallized into coherent and robust doctrines, continue to influence our minds strongly even today. Underscoring the fundamental concern for human well-being and emphasizing human agency, these schools of thoughts, especially the Enlightenment humanism, advanced further by advocating that human well-being could be attained only after emancipating man from religious impositions, by breaking the

shackles of superstition and by disregarding clerical dictates. In this, these doctrines not only distanced themselves from rituals and superstitions but also became devoid of spirituality. The distancing from religion grew more in the Enlightenment humanism which emerged after the Renaissance humanism. Humanism now provided impetus for individuals to emerge as the sole agency of their well-being based on reason and thus become makers of their own destiny. This, in turn, aimed at restoring human dignity—dignity became a major concern for Humanism.<sup>2</sup>

### Moments of convergence

Swami Vivekananda, a child of the ‘Bengal Renaissance’, was well versed in European philosophical doctrines. He had read works of a number of European philosophers like Hegel, Hume, Comte et al. But in his attempt at understanding the ‘West’ he did not forget the ‘East’. Rather, he was strongly influenced by the Vedas and the Upanishads. Actually, his formal education in colonial institutions as well as his independent intellectual pursuits enabled him to nurture a ‘cross-cultural mentality’<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, his thoughts concerning human well-being were no mimetic representation of Western humanism. Though exposed to the ideas of European Renaissance and Enlightenment,

the influence of traditional Indian philosophy was strong in Vivekananda's thoughts and we can uncover moments when his ideas converge with those of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism and again notice some crucial departures.

### Significant departure

Powered by reason, the Renaissance humanism and, more emphatically, the Enlightenment humanism, in their concern for human well-being, rejected the religious and the spiritual and emphasized only the material well-being. Here, Vivekananda made a significant departure. Overwhelmed by the spirituality of his civilization, Vivekananda, while emphasizing the spiritual well-being, did not reject the material because these, to him, were not contradictory but a continuum. There is no doubt material well-being was crucial to him. In fact, he believed material well-being was a prerequisite for spiritual quest. Not only so, for Vivekananda, religion was to play a positive role in one's life. For him, '... if a religion cannot help man wherever he may be, wherever he stands, it is not of much use; it will remain only a theory for the chosen few. Religion, to help mankind, must be ready and able to help him in whatever condition he is. . . .'<sup>4</sup>

Dissuading woman and man from God and spirituality was crucial for Enlightenment humanism. Renaissance humanism had also distanced itself from God to some extent. These schools called upon human agency to serve exclusively for the fulfilment of material needs of mankind. But Vivekananda did not isolate woman and man from God. Instead of creating such a rift, he attempted to bring women and men closer to God and his thoughts were pegged

on the principle of 'Divine in Man'<sup>5</sup>. For him 'Man is God, he is Nārāyana'<sup>6</sup>. In this, he was inspired by the concept of *tattvamasi* (thou art That) as expressed in the Upanishads. He too called for human agency, but that would not only serve fellow beings, but in doing so would serve God as divinity was recognized in every woman and man. The poor, who needed human agency most were seen as *Daridranārāyan* (God manifested in the poor) and ensuring their well-being would, in turn, lead to a higher good because 'service is to be rendered as worship to the Divine manifested in living beings'<sup>7</sup>. This also becomes evident from Vivekananda's oft-quoted message, '*Bahurupe sammukhe tomār chārdi kothā khujicha Ishwar / Jive prem kare jei jan, sei jan sebiche lshwar*' that is to say: Where do you search after God? He is present before you in myriad forms; One who loves all beings, serves God.

### Stress on *sevā*

Recognizing the need for human agency, Vivekananda laid stress on *sevā* or service for human well-being. In this context, Sumit Sarkar notes that the 'Basic religious-philosophical concepts, consequently, had to be given new meanings. *Karma* became, for Vivekananda, not traditional caste-based rituals and obligations determined by previous birth, but non-traditional social service'<sup>8</sup>. Here, Vivekananda's thoughts seem to converge with the ideas of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism which emphasised human agency as the sole instrument for ensuring human well-being. In this spirit he said, 'We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves'<sup>9</sup>.

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Vivekananda went further to set up the Ramakrishna Mission on 1 May, 1897, which, apart from spiritual preoccupations, would take up service for the needy as one of its major activities. In the words of Swami Gambhirananda, Vivekananda's 'greatest triumph lay in re-orienting the outlook of his brother disciples from ideas of personal salvation to a sympathetic comprehensions of the needs of the world'<sup>10</sup>. In fact, this has led many scholars to highlight his close affinity with the West. Yet, his vision was not impaired by Western assumptions. He departed from the West. In Europe, historical processes predicated on Enlightenment initiated a 'redistribution of responsibility for charity'<sup>11</sup> from the control of the ecclesiastical authorities to secular domains.<sup>12</sup> It assumed human welfare services to be free from religious and spiritual trappings. But for Vivekananda, service and spirituality could not be separated. Hence he entrusted the Mission with the task of service as one of its major activities.

As indicated before, primacy of human dignity was crucial to Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism. This spirit had initiated a change in the nature of philanthropy in the West. Now, the dominant Western note of philanthropy is service rendered out of a sense of duty towards fellow beings, rather than charity done out of sympathy. In Vivekananda's discourse too we find the term service or *sevā*. In both cases, it can be argued that there was an attempt to restore dignity of the receiver of service whose individuality was not to be hurt by the magnanimity of the giver. While Western humanism moved away from religious considerations and gave rise to secular and philanthropic activities, Swami Vivekananda's notion of service was

ultimately spiritualized as a duty towards God, because every individual, for him, was the embodiment of God and God cannot be helped out of sympathy, but only served out of a sense of love. He proclaimed, 'You cannot help anyone, you can only serve, . . . if you have the privilege. . . .'<sup>13</sup> As service to man was service to God, the giver of service should feel blessed in getting an opportunity to serve. Swamiji said: 'Let the giver kneel down and give thanks, let the receiver stand up and permit.'<sup>14</sup>

### Rise of biocentrism

Today humanism, despite its tall claims, seems to have lost its charm. In the wake of ecological debates and movements and growing consciousness of animal and plant rights, humanism, which propagates unhindered human growth and 'progress', stands to be chastised as being selfishly anthropocentric. Humankind, in its unbridled march of 'progress', have been indiscriminately and unethically destructive towards earth and its resources—both living and non-living. With the rise in consciousness, a 'new ethics' of biocentrism is developing today where respect for the non-humans is valued. Many wise persons have also realized today that indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources will ultimately lead to a grave crisis. It will spell an ecological disaster and, as a consequence, will endanger our existence, as well as that of other species. For both ethical reasons and ecological sustainability humanism is now being reassessed. Today, it is transcending its narrow anthropocentric boundaries and moving towards a more tolerant, accommodative and more ethical humanism called 'Ecological humanism'.

Curiously enough, what the 'enlightened' and 'superior metropolis'—the

‘West’—did not pay heed to, a man from the ‘Orient’, who died in 1902, had the vision and ethics to express concern for the same. Vivekananda valued even the life of a tiny worm. In fact, he proceeded further from brotherhood and harmonious relation among all beings to oneness of all. He said, ‘. . . the one central ideal of Vedanta is this oneness. . . . There is but one life, one world, one existence. Everything is that One, the difference is in degree and not in kind. The difference between our lives is not in kind. The Vedanta entirely denies such ideas as that animals are separate from men. . . . Oneness includes all animals. If man’s life is

immortal, so also is the animal’s. . . . A God who is partial to his children called men, and cruel to his children called brute beasts, is worse than a demon. I would rather die a hundred times than worship such a God’<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, it can be said that Vivekananda’s thoughts on human well-being, at times, do converge with some of the ideas of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism and, at moments, make significant departures from them. His thoughts also transcend the narrow anthropocentric nature of humanism and remain firmly grounded on the Vedantic oneness of all beings. ■

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