



Liberty as Conceived By Swami Vivekananda

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ABSTRACT

Liberty as perceived by Vivekananda was all comprehensive. Being a spiritualist, he turned to religion and in Hindu religion found the variation of different sects as source of infinite liberty for everyone to think and live his own life in his own way. Vivekananda's pride in Hinduism did not make him a fanatic. He was a secular person, who believed in the equality and liberty of all religions. As such, he was against all sorts of religious conversions. Apart from this, Vivekananda had zeal of a social reformer. He wanted dignity and liberty for women and here many of his thoughts are strikingly similar to one of the greatest liberals of the world, J.S.Mill. Vivekananda also claimed freedom of speech and action for every individual. For Vivekananda, non-existence of liberty would lead to degeneration and retrogression at the individual level (of man), political level (of Nation), and societal level (race as a whole).

KEYWORDS : Swami Vivekananda, J.S.Mill, Liberty, Society, Women, Hinduism

Swami Vivekananda was a great thinker, with zeal to change the society. His thoughts were permeated with issues that were not only political but also moral and spiritual. However, these thoughts were not devoid of the social aspects. Swami Vivekananda was a multifaceted personality and he has evoked interest in intellectuals, spiritualists, social reformers and political theorists. However, since it would be too much to discuss all the issues that Vivekananda addressed, this paper will mainly concentrate on the concept of liberty as Vivekananda conceived it. The Indian thinkers had always conceived of freedom in spiritual terms. To Indian thinkers and philosophers, freedom meant the freedom of soul, from the bondage of life and death that is salvation or moksha. Swami Vivekananda did not denounce this spiritual aspect.

Swami Vivekananda believed in religious liberty. He like his spiritual master, Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa was tolerant of all religions. He was rather secular and broad minded. He believed that everyone should have religious liberty to follow whatever religion one wants and as such he was against all kinds of religious conversions. In his letter to Surforaz Hussain, Vivekananda wrote, "I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, the theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they maybe, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind. Despite being secular minded, Vivekananda took pride in Hindu religion and referring to various sects of Hindu religion, he said that the various sects of the religion allow marvellous variation and infinite amount of liberty to think and live our own lives.

He said, "there is something in us which is free and permanent but it is neither the body nor the mind. The body is dying every minute and the mind is constantly changing but beyond this finer covering is Ataman, the true self of the man, the permanent, and the ever free. Now freedom is only possible if no external power can exert any influence or produce any change. Freedom is only possible to the being who is beyond all conditions, of laws, all bondages of cause and effect. In other words, the unchangeable alone can be free and therefore immortal. This being Ataman, the real self of the man is beyond all conditions and as such it has neither birth nor death. Without birth or death, eternal ever existing is the soul of the man". Therefore, Swami Vivekananda firmly believed in spiritual freedom like many Indian ancient philosophers. However, while they stopped here, he was very much a liberal in true sense of the term. He said, "Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, of growth and well being. Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress and marriage and in everything, so long as he does not injure others. Here Vivekananda emphasises upon not only political and civil liberty but social liberty as well. Here he shows a striking resemblance with western thinkers. If we take the instance of J.S. Mill, the greatest western liberal, we find a similar propensity to free man from all bondages. Mill too emphasised on liberty of

thought and action. He went to the extent of saying, "if all mankind minus one were of one opinion and only one person were of contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. Thus, Mill believes in liberty of thought and action of not only the majority but each and every person. Vivekananda too was believer in equality of each and every person. Only Vivekananda's society was more fragmented- divided more on the basis of class, gender and caste which had been the predominant features of the then Hindu society. For Vivekananda, non-existence of liberty would lead to degeneration and retrogression at the individual level (of man), political level (of Nation), and societal level (race as a whole). At the political level, India being the colony of Britain at that time only made freedom of speech more difficult. Mill was addressing the problems of a democratic and an advanced society. Vivekananda was addressing the problems of a backward society, which had not attained democracy and was not politically independent. He urged the Indian youth of his time to shed weakness and be strong. At the societal level Indian society in Vivekananda's time was ridden with caste divisions, where the shudras or the lower castes were looked down upon in such a way that high caste people would not even consider them human beings. It was in this society that Vivekananda was claiming the freedom of speech and action for everyone. Coming back to his comparison with J.S.Mill, we see that both have taken the individual liberty or freedom to zenith, the only limitation being not harming others. J.S.Mill divided human actions into two spheres, self regarding and other regarding. Other regarding action mean one that affect or harm others and thus one that Government is fully entitled to control. Self-regarding action means the action which affects the individual only and does not injure or harm others and should therefore be regarded as inviolable.

Vivekananda has not implicitly divided man's action into self regarding and other regarding categories but when he says that man must have liberty in food, dress, marriage and in everything, so long as he does not injure others, Vivekananda is emphasising the same point that Mill emphasized. Thus, both agree that as long as individual actions do not affect or injure others, there should not be any encroachment or limitation upon them. Vivekananda paid special attention to the liberty or freedom of women. He referred to the Vedas and the Upanishads where women taught the highest truths and received the same veneration as men. Vivekananda wanted the intellectual growth and liberty for women. He said, "mother has been born to revive wonderful shakti in India and making her the nucleus, once more Gargis and Maitreyes will be born in the world. He asserted that the uplift of masses must come first and then only can real good come about for the country, for India. He believed that women must be in position to solve their own problems in their own way and believed in the capability of Indian women to attain this freedom. He said, "for if they get the right sort of education, they may well turn out to be the

ideal women in the world..... with such an education women will solve their own problems. They have all the time been trained in helplessness, servile dependence on others, and so they are good only to weep their eyes out at this slightest approach of a mishap or danger. Along with other things they should acquire the spirit of valour and heroism. In the present day, it has become necessary for them to learn self defence. Here again, we find that Vivekananda had a similar vent of mind like J.S.Mill. He argues in his essay, "the subjection of women" that women have been schooled in suppressing themselves. Mill says that the main foundation of the moral life of modern times must be justice and prudence, the respect of each for the rights of every other and the ability of each to take care of himself. Both Mill and Vivekananda thus, blame the society for training the women in suppressing them and making themselves, dependent on others. Both advocated self-reliance or women and ardently believed in the liberty of women. Thus Vivekananda made a significant contribution to Indian political thought by incorporating the western idea of political and social liberty into the classical Indian conception of freedom, the spiritual liberation which emphasizes upon the freedom of the soul and ultimate salvation that is freedom from the bondage of repeated births and deaths. Retaining the spiritual side intact, he built a whole edifice of political and social liberty, having western ethos and it is remarkable that for venturing into a territory in which no Indian thinker had gone before, Vivekananda did not show any disdain for Indian culture or Hindu religion. On the contrary for upholding the cause of women's liberty, he referred to Vedas and Upanishads which had given equal rights and freedom to women. Thus Vivekananda's thoughts on liberty or freedom are equally relevant for the present day society. The individualists, the feminists and the spiritualists will all find his thought relevant. However, the important fact remains that Vivekananda had never conceived the negative aspect of liberty that means freedom to do what ever one wishes. It is true that Vivekananda did not look towards state for putting chains on the abuse of liberty but he looked towards a more effective force that is the moral safeguards. He believed in truth, strength and chastity and purity of one's character to check the abuse of liberty. In today's valueless world, Vivekananda's teachings seem to be all the more relevant. When Vivekananda refers to education and self defence as tools for women's liberty, it becomes all the more meaningful in the light of large number of atrocities that are perpetrated on Indian women these days. Vivekananda had preached the freedom and liberty of all with the moral awakening (particularly of the youth).

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