Research Paper Philosophy

Reimagining the Concept of 'Liberty': Swami Vivekanand's Idea of 'Inclusive Freedom'

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ABSTRACT

The idea of 'freedom' as advocated by Swami Vivekanand can only be understood by looking at the broader aspects of his understanding regarding human 'self' and its integral relation with society. In this paper I argue that it is not possible to compartmentalize his idea under the veil of 'positive or negative' liberty (the categories explicitly used by Berlin to categorize Western notion of 'Freedom'), also it is important to move beyond the category of spiritual freedom, which I believe, does not capture the real intention of Vivekanand and though an integral part of his thought, fails to bring out the idea in totality. I propose to call his idea of freedom as 'inclusive freedom'.

KEYWORDS inclusive freedom, Vivekanand, *karmayoga, Advaita*

The idea of freedom in Swami Vivekanand's thought can be deciphered by looking at the broader aspects of his understanding regarding human self and its integral relation with community. This understanding was largely influenced by the traditional philosophical traditions in India and also the context in which it took shape. In this article I argue that Vivekanand's idea of freedom was a product of an amalgamation of different strands of philosophical conceptualizations which included a redefinition of the ideals of 'Advaita' Vedanta. This, I argue, can be understood as the idea 'inclusive freedom'. But why do we need a new category like 'inclusive freedom' to theorize his idea? I argue that it is not possible to compartmentalize his idea under the veil of positive or negative liberty (the terms explicitly used by Isaiah Berlin in Two Concepts of Liberty to categorize western notion of freedom). I also believe that it is important to look beyond the idea of spiritual freedom, a category normally used to define Vivekanand's thought. Though an integral part of his thought, these categories fail to bring out the idea in totality.

Vivekanand's idea of freedom

A seminal difference between the western and Indian philosophy is with regard to the explanation of human self. The dominant western philosophy often tries to explain it on the basis of mind-body duality. However in Indian tradition there is an additional third component that is used as complementary to mind and body in its explanation and understanding of human self. This component is that of spirit or soul or 'self', as Vivekanand would call it. It is this difference in frame of reference that ultimately leads to a difference of opinion regarding the nature of self in Vivekanand's thought and became a significant component in his ideation of 'inclusive freedom'.

Vivekanand's idea of freedom reflected an integrative capacity that could harmoniously accommodate various similar and confrontational categories. So, though individual being was his primary unit of analysis, it was always in relation to the community. Individual was not seen as atomistic being having an independent existence in isolation. In fact it was considered to be integrated harmoniously with other beings and thereby to the society at large. Even enjoyment of freedom was not considered to be an individual experience. True freedom, Vivekanand opined, was a combined experience of all the individuals in society as all individuals were spiritually connected. So the difference and discriminations created within society on the basis of caste, class, gender, religion and race etc. were seen as constraints which could be overcome by spiritual self-realization of all individuals. It helped in the realization that all individuals were the manifestation of the same absolute (Brahman) and are all thereby spiritually equal, one of the primary tenets of 'Advaita' Vedanta.

Even within an individual the three aspects of mind, body and soul were considered to be in harmonious relation and pursuing together the search for freedom. The necessary dichotomy and duality was thereby rejected. Vivekanand believed that the pursuit of true freedom was the natural tendency of all individuals, and it was ignorance or maya that created real hurdles. Therefore a harmonious relation between mind, body and spirit, through yoga, and a united unidirectional struggle was considered necessary to overcome this state of visible ignorance.

Individuals were considered to be spiritual and thereby it was their right to know their true selves. Therefore Vivekanand laid a lot of indirect emphasis upon the necessity of proper environment that could support individual's full development and intellectual journey. Civil liberties including the basic liberties of thought and expression were considered seminal in this process. But for Vivekanand freedom was not only about rights, it was also about duties. The idea of duty becomes explicit when Vivekanand advocates selfless service as the primary and most significant way to attain true freedom. He talks of duty not only in the sense of accountability and responsibility but also as a means of one's own pursuit. Therefore even if one has successfully raised himself to the state of liberation, it was his duty to help and guide others in their individual pursuit to true freedom. True freedom, according to Vivekanand, could only be experienced when everyone in society experiences it. So rights and duties together find space in his idea of freedom. Further, Vivekanand also believed that the basic human values of liberty, equality and fraternity were compatible and complementary. They were harmoniously placed and formed an integral trio of any ideal society. Freedom, it is held, is based on the idea of spiritual equality which, in the form of selfless service, increases fraternity among individuals.

According to Vivekanand the search for true freedom was a project unfinished; it was a path towards liberation, a pursuit of ultimate state of mind where happiness and satisfaction were also of little value. It was such a state of being where individual became so selfless that even seva (or selfless service) was not seen as a means to freedom but considered to be an end in itself and performed for its own good (even the inherent desire for liberation vanished). It was here that true freedom could be experienced. Vivekanand argued that an end to the 'ego' by realizing one's true self was the only way to end the hurdles of spirit, mind and body. So for him constraints at both external and internal levels were equally significant and he held that it was the ego that was the prime source

of these constraints. Vivekanand therefore insisted that individual should move beyond and achieve a state where it was not guided by the ego and was therefore selfless. The idea of inclusive freedom was therefore considered as a pursuit rather than an end-in-itself because the real experience of freedom, he believed, could only be gained in the very journey towards this ultimate state as the 'ideal' state itself was beyond reach.

Conceptualizing 'inclusive freedom'

Inclusive freedom, as reflected in the ideas of Vivekanand was not 'negative' because it did not consider individual to be 'atomistic' beings who could invariably judge their freedom on the basis of absence of external coercion. The difference between 'self' and 'the other' was not appreciated in Vivekanand's understanding. What supersedes it was the idea of spiritual equality and that freedom of individual could only be enjoyed in community. It considered all beings as one and of the same community where each individual was a part of the absolute. Similarly, inclusive freedom was different from 'positive' liberty. Positive liberty accepted the duality of the higher and the lower self. However, the understanding of positive freedom considered the higher self to be the 'rational' self and it is here that the basic difference lay. Inclusive freedom in Vivekanand's thought looked beyond the category of rational self- it included the role of spirit. An overemphasis on rationality could lead to precarious self doubt, but spirit being an integral part of truth itself could not confuse. Rationality limited one's vision to the mind whereas spirit was beyond mind and could guide one's rationality to develop in the right direction. Further, rationality interpreted truth as it appeared or as experienced, however, there could be higher truth which may not be visible due to ignorance or the limitation of mind to look beyond the apparent truth. Self-realization as a means to true freedom helped to overcome one's ignorance and look beyond the boundaries of apparent truth. Vivekanand believed that a deeper understanding of our true self could help to overcome the lower self with ease. Moreover, inclusive freedom was more than just self-realization. It was also about seva or selfless service. Further, the 'exercise concept of freedom', or positive freedom viewed the idea of freedom in relation to the self and did not carry it beyond to locate it in harmony with the community. Inclusive freedom therefore had wider scope than positive freedom as it asserts that any freedom in absence of equality, fraternity and harmony as void.

The traditional Indian philosophical thought on freedom has often been categorized as spiritual freedom and is therefore believed to be normative and practically impossible to be attained in this worldly life. Though spiritual freedom is an important aspect of Vivekanand's thought, inclusive freedom goes beyond it and explains how it was possible to attain freedom in this world under normal living conditions. Moreover, he did not talk only about spirit. Mind, body and spirit are three integrated realities and the freedom of all three was very important for a comprehensive experience of freedom. Therefore experiences in this world are not negated or rejected completely as ignorance; in fact it was seen as apparent reality or reality of a lower level. The aspiration therefore should be of reality of a higher level that could be achieved through self-realization. Asceticism in the search for freedom was categorically rejected by Vivekananda. He believed that the true search for freedom should begin from the self and proceed through selfless service to the society, the idea of 'nishkama karma' as propagated in Gita. The idea of freedom was thereby brought above its transcendental and metaphysical tags and located in society as an achievable state through the practice of karmayoga. Spiritual freedom, therefore, though a necessary condition is not a sufficient category to understand the idea of freedom as proposed by Vivekanand.

Conclusion

The maestro of the modern Indian philosophical thought lay in the fact that it not only responded to the threat posed by the colonial context but also provided an alternative framework to view the dominant problems of moral and social philosophy. Vivekanand's Idea of freedom was a definite proof of this fact. This lens was based on a conscious reconstruction of indigenous Indian philosophy. The reconstruction was aimed at understanding the complex problems of society and trying to find solutions that were 'acceptable, affordable and practicable'. However, there was also an explicit exit from the traditional thought at certain crucial and seminal aspects like the idea of 'reality' or 'true freedom' etc. This exit can be understood either by considering it as a conscious revivalism of the traditional philosophy, which helps us safely situate Vivekanand in the category of 'critical traditionalists' as defined by Bhiku Parekh, or as an Indian response in the civilizational debate based on the East-West dichotomies. Whatever it be, it is clear that there was a definite reconstruction and redefinition of the ideals of Advaitic tradition, and 'inclusive freedom' is definitely a product of this effort. This idea of inclusive freedom is not a compartmentalized category; in fact, it is a liberal category which can easily accommodate deferring views. It allows for dissent and is based on the principles of tolerance. Selfless service or 'seva' is the ideal it proposes, and based on this ideal Vivekanand envisioned the possibility of a 'universal religion' and the creation of the values of cosmopolitanism.

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