

Individuality, the State, and the Political Thought of Swami Vivekananda

Payel Bhattacharjee

Invited Lecturer, Philosophy, Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya

Abstract:

This paper explores the political philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, focusing on his unique synthesis of individual liberty and social welfare. Although he distanced himself from active political involvement, his ideas present a coherent vision of the State rooted in ethical and spiritual principles. Vivekananda emphasized that the ultimate aim of society should be the welfare of the many and the happiness of the many, while firmly upholding individual freedom. The study analyzes his concept of liberty as a positive and constructive force, closely linked with equality and the full development of human potential. It also examines his critique of Western individualism and social Darwinism, as well as his rejection of totalitarian forms of socialism. Instead, he advocated a democratic and evolutionary approach to social change, grounded in mass education and moral development. Furthermore, the paper discusses his preference for democracy over monarchy and his critique of exploitative capitalism. It concludes that Vivekananda's thought offers a balanced framework reconciling individual autonomy with collective welfare, making it relevant to contemporary political discourse.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda, Political Philosophy, Liberty, Equality, Individualism, Socialism, Democracy, State, Social Welfare, Advaita Vedanta

Introduction:

Vivekananda was not a political activist, and he consciously distanced himself from politics. In a letter, he explicitly stated: I am not a political worker; my work lies in the realm of the soul (Vivekananda, Complete Works). Elsewhere, he asserted: I do not subscribe to any form of politics. God and Truth constitute the only politics in this world; everything else is mere nonsense. Consequently, he did not concern himself much with political opinions. Nevertheless, he held distinct ideals regarding the nature of the State, for political philosophy is inextricably intertwined with social philosophy (Radhakrishnan, 1927). Swamiji believed that the ideal for both the individual and society should be a course of action dedicated to the welfare of the many, the happiness of the many (Vivekananda, Complete Works). He would never endorse a social system in which the claims of the masses were denied. For instance, while defining the ideals of Hindu society, he expressed the view that sacrificing the material well-being of the majority—merely to afford a select few the opportunity to pursue spiritual practices, or to remain submerged in the rigid demands of a thousand castes—is never justifiable. Perhaps there are no more than one hundred thousand truly spiritual men and women across the whole of India. Must, then, three hundred million people remain steeped in barbarism and starvation solely for the sake of the spiritual advancement of this handful? In essence, his ideal was that the State and society should exist to ensure the happiness and well-being of the

masses. However, unlike Hegel, Green, or Marx, he did not advocate for the sacrifice of individual liberty upon the altar of the State or society (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 1999).

The Principle of Liberty and Equality:

In this regard, his ideal was one of absolute individual liberty. Thus, within his political philosophy, the principle of prioritizing the welfare of the many over individual comfort coexists harmoniously with the principle of absolute individual freedom. His views on this subject are encapsulated in the definition of Liberty that he penned for a newspaper. His definition reads as follows: Liberty does not imply an absence of barriers preventing you or me from appropriating the wealth of others; rather, it is our natural right to utilize our own bodies, intellects, or resources according to our own will, provided we cause no harm to others; furthermore, every member of society ought to possess equal opportunities to acquire wealth, education, and knowledge (Vivekananda, Complete Works). It is evident from this that he did not conceive of liberty in the negative sense—as did the Western individualists of the nineteenth century—but rather offered it a positive definition, much in the manner of the sociologists (Radhakrishnan, 1927). And the opportunity for the full utilization of one's body, mind, and intellect constitute its primary element. The second element is equal opportunity in all spheres—be it wealth, the acquisition of knowledge, or education. In other words, equality is inextricably linked with liberty. The form that individualism assumed in the Western world—intertwined with Darwin's theory of evolution and shaped by the hands of Herbert Spencer—led to the view that, in the economic sphere (specifically regarding a higher standard of living), extending any opportunity to the poor was deemed futile (Spencer, 1864; Darwin, 1859). The theory of the Survival of the Fittest introduced the notion into the economic realm that the poor are, by nature, unfit to survive. Vivekananda subjected this deeply disdainful doctrine to severe criticism: Those who argue that if the ignorant and the poor are granted liberty—that is, full rights over their bodies, property, and so forth—and if their children are accorded equal opportunities to improve their circumstances and acquire knowledge just like the wealthy and the upper classes, they will inevitably go astray—do they speak thus for the welfare of society, or are they merely blinded by their own self-interest? In essence, this represents a struggle of vested interests—a contention that the poor have been defeated in the battle of life and possess no means of survival. Thus, we observe that he held fundamental disagreements with the nineteenth-century individualists such as Mill, Spencer, and Bentham (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 1999). However, neither was he an advocate of the omnipotent State. In this regard, he held views distinct from those of Hegel, Bosanquet, Green, and Marx. As a believer in the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda accorded the highest priority to the liberation of the individual (Radhakrishnan, 1927). Consequently, he stood opposed to any totalitarian social system that ran counter to the ideals of reason and liberty; for him, the greatest reward for a human being lies in striving toward physical, mental, and spiritual freedom—and in assisting others to do the same (Vivekananda, Complete Works). Any social regulations that impede the realization of this freedom are detrimental, and steps should be taken to dismantle them with urgency. Thus, he was neither a Mill-style individualist nor a Marxist proponent of totalitarian state power.

Individual Autonomy and the Collective:

His View: Upon examining society—viewed as a construct of both the individual and the collective—it becomes evident that the complete surrender of individual autonomy to the collective entails both merits and demerits (Vivekananda, Complete Works). Foremost among its merits is that, in the performance of

socially prescribed tasks, the individual's proficiency is enhanced. However, the flaw in this lies in the fact that it transforms living human beings into lifeless machines. Thus, true well-being lies in the free manifestation of willpower. According to Swamiji, the more successfully a living being can express its willpower, the greater its joy becomes, and the higher the level of being it evolves into (Radhakrishnan, 1927). God's will is perfectly realized; hence, He stands supreme. In other words, the fulfillment and well-being of life depend entirely upon the development of willpower. Therefore, individual freedom is the most conducive to well-being (Vivekananda, Complete Works). For this reason, Swamiji advocated for the development of free will in any form—in my view, it is better to make mistakes while guided by one's own free will and intellect than to be goodness in a mechanical, machine-like fashion. Consequently, only a state and society composed of free individuals can be truly conducive to well-being; it cannot be otherwise. Can that truly be called a society which consists merely of an aggregate of human beings resembling lumps of clay, lifeless machines, or a heap of pebbles? How could such a society ever be beneficial? What, then, is the solution? Is it individual liberty, or the collective well-being of society as a whole? Swamiji has pointed out a most elegant solution to this dilemma. It is this: only when a spirit of spontaneous renunciation arises naturally within the individual does the act of individual self-sacrifice—submitting oneself to the primacy of society—become truly beneficial (Vivekananda, Complete Works).

Socialism and Democracy:

It is precisely for this reason that, in advocating for the establishment of socialism, he did not endorse the use of physical force. As he stated: I believe in evolution and in slow, gradual development (Vivekananda, Complete Works). And, in his view, liberty is the primary prerequisite for such development. Consequently, he maintained that the foremost task is to educate the masses; thereafter, they will be capable of determining their own destiny. Their lives must be uplifted to a higher plane of existence, illuminated by the light of intellect, and awakened to a sense of moral discernment; only then will they be able to distinguish between what is truly beneficial and what is detrimental to their own interests, thereby establishing a truly benevolent society. Vivekananda conducted this entire discourse within the context of socialism. For it is here that he offered the following definition of socialism: any doctrine that demands the sacrifice of individual liberty for the sake of social dominance is termed Socialism, whereas any doctrine that champions the rights or interests of the individual is termed Individualism (Vivekananda, Complete Works). Undoubtedly, in terms of his political philosophy, Vivekananda was a thoroughgoing democrat (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 1999). He severely criticized the exploitative nature of capitalism, its system of special privileges, and the expansion of monopolistic advantages. He observed that those who hold the wealth keep royal palaces confined within their own exclusive circles; they plunder and drain the common people, only to then conscript them as soldiers and dispatch them to distant lands to die—with the assurance that, should victory be achieved, their own coffers will be filled with riches. Meanwhile, the common people themselves perish on the battlefield. The essence of Vivekananda's argument is that, no matter how firmly capitalism may be grounded in the framework of democracy, it inevitably evolves into socialism. Echoes of these very sentiments of Vivekananda can be found in Lenin's seminal work, *Imperialism* (Lenin, 1917).

Various Forms of Governance:

In various discourses, Vivekananda has primarily examined two distinct systems of governance: Monarchy and Democracy (Vivekananda, Complete Works). However, through an analysis of Indian

history, he demonstrates that—across different epochs—various social classes have exerted their dominance over the institution of monarchy. He asserted unequivocally that even the best monarchy cannot replace self-governance. Subjects who are entirely sustained and nurtured by a god-like monarch never learn the art of self-governance; instead, becoming perpetually dependent upon the King, they gradually grow feeble and bereft of all vitality. This idea closely resembles Mill's argument that good governance is no substitute for self-government (Mill, 1861). Thus, democracy—based on the consent of the governed—emerges as the most suitable system (Vivekananda, Complete Works).

The Ideal State:

Vivekananda's concept of the ideal state is as follows: If it were possible to construct a state in which the wisdom of the Brahmin era, the culture of the Kshatriya, the administrative power of the Vaishya, and the egalitarian ideals of the Shudra—all coexist in perfect balance, yet without any of their inherent flaws—then that would constitute an ideal state (Vivekananda, Complete Works). Immediately after presenting this concept, Vivekananda himself raises a question: But is this truly possible? Pointing out why this is unfeasible in the real world, he observes that the balance of good and evil will always remain constant. Through this conclusion, Vivekananda rejects the notion of a perfectly utopian state.

Conclusion:

The core of Swami Vivekananda's political philosophy lies in a unique synthesis of individual liberty and social welfare. According to him, a state or society attains true well-being only when every individual within it possesses the full opportunity to develop their own free will and can function independently, rather than acting as a mere automaton subservient to the commands of others. He believed that socialism could be truly effective only if it were built upon the foundation of voluntary self-sacrifice by the people, rather than being imposed through coercion. Vivekananda's ideal state was not a fanciful utopia, but rather a system in which the positive attributes of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—representing every stratum of society—would be harmoniously integrated, while their inherent flaws would be absent. He vehemently criticized the exploitative practices of capitalists and emphasized the establishment of education and rights for the common people through democratic means. Ultimately, his objective was to establish a form of democratic socialism in which both the spiritual liberation and the material advancement of individuals would be sustained in parallel.

References

1. Vivekananda, Swami. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. 9 vols. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989.
2. Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927.
3. Mukherjee, Subrata, and Sushila Ramaswamy. *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 1999.
4. Rolland, Romain. *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1997.
5. Nikhilananda, Swami. *Vivekananda: A Biography*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2003.
6. Mill, John Stuart. *Considerations on Representative Government*. London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861.
7. Spencer, Herbert. *Principles of Biology*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1864.

8. Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859.
9. Lenin, V. I. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1917.
10. Lokeshwarananda, Swami, editor. Chintanayak Vivekananda. Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1997.