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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Egalitarianism is a doctrine or philosophy which endorses the fact that every person rich or poor, man or woman, one who belongs to any caste or religion is equal and everyone should be treated equally. Swami Vivekananda was one of the biggest proponents of Egalitarianism.

Swamiji during his travels through different parts of the country noticed that people are living in extreme poverty and distress. He believed that the main cause for the downfall of India was because of the neglect and exploitation of the masses that took place for centuries. He was of the view that the upliftment of the downtrodden can take place through education, modern methods of agriculture and cottage industry. Swamiji was strictly opposed to caste-based discrimination. He was in favour of the Varna system which he thought was a great way of division of labour and would have ideally resulted in excellence in performance from each individual. Another form of egalitarianism that Swamiji wanted was the gender equality. He thought that women – whom he referred to as 'Shakti' or the creating force - had a much greater capability to change the society than men. He felt that men and women should be given equal opportunity in every sphere of life.

Keywords

Swami Vivekananda, Egalitarian, Social Equality, Caste-based Society, Womanhood, Shakti

Introduction

Social equality or an egalitarian society means that a society where every human being, irrespective of economic status, caste, religion, race, and gender, is equal and everyone should be treated equally. Every human being should have equal right and nobody should be discriminated against. No person should ever be a victim of social dogmas and prejudices. Society as a whole should act as a cohesive unit and should not become repulsive in any form. Every person should get opportunities to change his or her destiny. Swami Vivekananda was one of the biggest proponents of social equality, who loved and treated all as equal without making any distinction between people of different faith, race, nationality and gender.

Swamiji, during his travels through different parts of the country, noticed that the people were living in extreme poverty and despair. He opined that it is an insult to the starving people to offer religion¹. Swamiji also said that "I am a socialist not because that is a perfect system but half a loaf is better than no bread". In his interpretation of Karma-Yoga, Swamiji had a similar view on Capitalism or wealth creation. He thought that "a householder who does not struggle to get wealth is immoral. If he is lazy and content to lead an idle life, he is immoral, because upon him depend hundreds. If he gets riches, hundreds of others will be thereby supported". He thought that the householder's job is as important as any Monk's².

Each is great in his own place

Swami Vivekananda believed that the downfall of India is due to the neglect and oppression of the masses which took place for centuries. He was of the view that the upliftment of the downtrodden can take place through modern education, upgraded methods of agriculture and cottage industry. This view of Swamiji was later endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi. Swamiji had written a letter to Sri Alasinga Perumal in which he had said "how my heart ached to think of what we think of the poor, the low in India. They have no chance, no escape, no way to climb up. The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help - they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they feel the blows showering upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes."³

While giving an example of the prosperity of Irish immigrants in the United States, Swamiji opined that "in Ireland these people were treated as slaves, they were disregarded, they were made to toil and always told that they were destined to live in poverty. When the same people moved to the United States, the Brahman inside them was freed from slavery. They prospered as everybody around them told them that they can achieve whatever they set out to do. For the first time in their lives they could live with their heads held high and prosper." Quoting this example in the Indian context he further said that "India has for centuries been ruled by tyrants and Indians have believed that it is their destiny which cannot change. If given the opportunity and with the willingness to change the destiny, everyone can prosper."⁴

All are equal in front of the God

Swami Vivekananda was strictly against priesthood and untouchability, in a very hard hitting letter to one of his followers, Sir Alasinga Perumal, he said on priesthood "... sitting down these hundreds of years with an ever-increasing load of crystallised superstition on your heads, for hundreds of years spending all your energy about discussing the touchableness and untouchableness of this food or that, with all humanity crushed out of you by the continuous social tyranny of ages - what are you?". In another paragraph of the same letter he said "Come, be men! Kick out the priests who are always against progress. Because they would never mend; their heart would never become big. They are the offspring of centuries of superstition and

tyranny. Root out the priest craft first."⁵ He tried to boost the morale of people by saying "all power is within you; you can do anything and everything. Believe in that, do not believe that you are weak." It is very important in the present times because our faith is being challenged on various front.

Swamiji was strictly opposed to caste-based discrimination. Even though he was in favour of the Varna system which he thought was a great way of division of labour and would have ideally resulted in excellence of performance from each individual. According to him, the worst part of the caste system is untouchability and he wanted to root out this dogmatism from the society. He held Buddha, Christ and Shankaracharya in the highest regard. He believed that the Buddha had the heart which was missing in Hinduism.⁶

According to Swami Vivekananda, Buddha and Christ could identify themselves with everyone and they banished any kind of discrimination. He also opined that even though Shankara interpreted the Vedic scriptures to proclaim that every one of any sect and any caste was equal and had equal right to move to one Varna to another, his disciples failed to understand his interpretation of the Vedas which lead to the continuation of the discrimination which still prevails. In a letter to Smt. Indumati Mitra he wrote that "these distinctions of caste and the like have been the invention of our modern sapient Brahmins. Who is the servant of whom? Everyone is a servant of Lord Hari"⁷

In one of his lectures, Some Customs of the Hindus, Swami Vivekananda said that in preventing competition it produced stagnation, and completely blocked the progress of the people. He said that in taking away brutality it stopped social improvements. In checking competition, its increased population. In its favour, he said, were the facts that it was the only ideal of equality and fraternity. That money had nothing to do with social standing in the caste. All were equal. He said that the fault of all the great reformers was that they thought caste was due only to religious representation, instead of ascribing it to the right source, namely, the curious social conditions.⁸

Swamiji had immense respect for Lord Buddha and many of his views against caste-based discrimination were derived from actions and life of Buddha. He has quoted Buddha in many letters to his disciples, and in many of his lectures. In one of his lectures delivered in Chicago, Swamiji said "The great glory of the Master lay in his wonderful sympathy for everybody, especially for the ignorant and the poor. Some of his disciples were Brahmins. When Buddha was teaching, Sanskrit was no more the spoken language in India. It was then only in the books of the learned. Some of Buddha's Brahmin disciples wanted to translate his teachings into Sanskrit, but he distinctly told them, "I am for the poor, for the people; let me speak in the tongue of the people." And so, to this day the great bulk of his teachings are in the vernacular of that day in India."⁹

Given the chance, women can make the world a better place

Another form of egalitarianism that Swamiji wanted was gender equality. He described woman - whom he described as Shakti or the creating force - had a much greater capacity to change the society than men. He felt that men and women should be given equal opportunity in every sphere of life. People should avoid differentiating between a male and a female, we should feel that all are souls and they are all parts of God. Swamiji wanted to solve the problem of discrimination against women by their self-help and mutual aid. He said that with five hundred motivated men it will take me fifty years to transform India, but with fifty motivated women it may take only a few years.

Swamiji believed that women needed to be given proper education because if a woman is educated, then we educate a whole generation. He always said that education for women should be such that it should form character, increases the strength of mind, expands intellect and allows women to be independent. A country that does not respect its women has never become spiritual or great. Swami Vivekananda wrote in his letter to Srj Haripada Mitra "Do you know who is the real 'Shakti-worshipper'? It is he who knows the God is the Omnipresent Force in the Universe and sees women as the manifestation of that Force". In the same letter Swamiji quoted Manu who had said "gods bless those families where women are happy and well treated. Daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons."

In his lecture, Ideals of Womanhood, Swamiji had described the status of women in ancient India with these words "The ideal of womanhood centres in the Arian race of India, the most ancient in the worlds history. In that race, men and women were priests, 'sabatimini [saha-dharmini], ' or co-religionists, as the Vedas call them. There every family had its hearth or altar, on which, at the time of the wedding, the marriage fire was kindled, which was kept alive, until either spouse died, when the funeral pile was lighted from its spark. There man and wife together offered their sacrifices, and this idea was carried so far that a man could not even pray alone, because it was held that he was only half a being, for that reason, no unmarried man could become a priest."¹⁰

Swami Vivekananda felt sad about the condition of women in India when compared to their counterparts in the western countries, he said "look at our girls, becoming mother below their teens! I now see it all. The gods are pleased where the women are held in esteem. We are horrible sinners; and our degradation is due to our calling women "despicable worms," "gateways to hell," and so forth. There is all the difference between heaven and hell."¹¹

If the mountain does not come, Mohammed must go to the mountain

Swamiji was unable to forgive Shankaracharya because Adi Shankara had applied the logic of forbidding Vedic rituals to the Shudras. The Shudras were barred from higher modes of worship and knowledge. Vivekananda had said "Shankara had not the slightest bit of Buddha's wonderful heart, dry intellect merely - for fear of Tantras, for fear of the mob, in his attempt to cure a boil he amputated the very arm itself!" He also said, "those poor people are leading the life of brutes, is simply due to ignorance. We

have for all ages been sucking their blood and trampling them under foot. The poor are too poor to come to schools, and they will gain nothing by reading poetry and all that sort of thing. We as a nation have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality and raise the masses." Swamiji further wrote "There cannot be any growth without liberty. Our ancestors freed religious thought, and we have a wonderful religion. But they put a heavy chain on the feet of society, and our society is, in a word, horrid, diabolical. In the West, society always had freedom, and look at them. On the other hand, look at their religion." In the next paragraph of the same letter, he said that "Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress and marriage, and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others."

Swami Vivekananda was a great social reformer who tried to do away with stereotypes of religions and fought against social dogmatism. He laid special stress on eradication of poverty, removal of illiteracy, restitution of human dignity, liberty from fear, availability of spiritual and secular knowledge to all; irrespective of their class, caste and gender, upliftment of masses and social service as part of religious worship. He believed that the best form of worship is to see god in the poor, the downtrodden, the sick and the ignorant and to serve them. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission, India's foremost philanthropic and truly egalitarian organisation, for this purpose. Ramakrishna Sarada Mission runs Sister Nivedita schools for girl students across India.

He reminded all Indians to "*arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached*".¹²

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