



Exploring Marginality: Swami Vivekananda, Hinduism and the Tribals

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Abstract: It is mostly accepted that Swami Vivekananda succeeded to bring about an intellectual tsunami in the last decade of the 19th century, in the spiritual world. His messages delivered through utterances and writings, opened a new horizon. Besides, the motivational speeches of Swamiji provoked people to think afresh. Romain Rolland, the biographer of Swami Vivekananda observes, "I cannot touch these sayings of his scattered as they are through the pages of books ...without receiving a thrill through my body like can electric shock." At length, his message has been instrumental behind the foundation of a universal religion, an ideal society and so on. They also led to the process of man-making, nation-building and the formation of a perfect system of education. Being a social reformer, Vivekananda's other concerns had been the empowerment of women, the spread of education among the tribals, the generation of the spirit of nationalism and so on. Through the present paper, attempts are made to achieve the following objectives: A) The projection of Swami Vivekananda with his powerful messages; B) The introduction the concept of marginality with its multi-dimensional aspects; C) To locate the position of the tribals among the Indians; D) Attempts are made to analyse the factors that are responsible for the marginalization of the tribals; E) The causes of conversion of the tribals into Christianity have been dealt with; F) Some factors have been discussed that may bring back the tribals within the orbit of the Hinduism and G) A series of measures has been suggested to bring back the tribals into the mainstream of Indian society.

Key Words: Swami Vivekananda, Nation Building, Women Empowerment, Tribals, Hinduism, Indian Society.

1. INTRODUCTION :

It is known to all that Arunachal Pradesh is the Eastern most state of India. It is also considered as the land of the tribals. This very land is occupied by different tribals with their cultures, practices traditions and so on. Many religions are also found among the tribals. By faith, the tribals are mostly the Christians, the Buddhists and the Hindus. Another reality is that in India, Hinduism is the practicing religion of the majority.¹ Being the citizens of India, the tribals of Arunachal Pradesh cannot be an exception to this observation. The Hinduism practised by the tribals may be interpreted through the attitude of Swami Vivekananda. Through the present paper, I have attempted to show how Swamiji dreamt of the rise of the Sudras or the working class people. In the present context, the word 'Sudras' may safely be applied to the tribals who live not only in Arunachal Pradesh but other parts of India as well.

Despite being a Hindu monk, Vivekananda gave emphasis on the foundation of a practical religion. To him, religion means the search for truth. The common truth of every religion is that each soul is potentially divine. Doctrines, dogmas, books, temples etc. are only the secondary details. The universal element in every religion is to help, man to attain perfection². The basic religious message of Swamiji was "To be good and do good, that is the whole of religion".

Being a social reformer, Vivekananda's concern had been the empowerment of the marginalised sections of society. According to him, no social progress had been possible without the upliftment of the tribals or the dalits of India. Vivekananda wanted to form a classless, casteless society. He did not bother about India's ethnic and religious pluralism. India had always sought her unity in love and respect to different sets and communities. It has been established beyond all doubts that all through his life, Swamiji had a soft corner for the marginalised section of society. In his own way, Swamiji attempted his level best to raise his voice for the rights of the subalterns.

2. METHODOLOGY :

In the present dissertation, basically, analytical method has been applied. Efforts have been made to analyse all the issues with critical approaches. Again, in some cases, the comparative method has been employed to have a clear perception of the situation. On many occasions, the quantitative and qualitative methods have also been followed.



3. Views and Analysis

Before analyzing Swamiji's close association with the tribals or the marginalised people, it is better to introduce the concept of marginality with its multiple aspects. Efforts have also been made to establish the proximity between marginality and mattering. The term Marginality has gained immense popularity in recent times. But, what is meant by marginality? It is better to admit that the notion of marginality is rather vague. Simply speaking, the term Marginality has close association with those who live on the margin of society. At length, it may be observed that marginalised people are those for whom the society pays no attention. The result is that the marginalised people often become the victims of exploitation from all corners. With the passage of time, many critics and researchers have been attempting to explore multiple dimensions of marginality. Attempts should also be made to provide with various definitions of marginality.

The term "Marginality" refers to the position of dissident intellectuals and social groups like the women, the Lesbians, the Gays, the blacks, the minorities, the physically challenged people, the Dalits who see themselves at a remove from the normative assumptions and oppressive power-structures of mainstream society. The term "Marginality" also suggests a negative experience of alienation. The term is used in academic debate and activist politics to suggest a position of advantage from which the dominant society can be critiqued and disrupted. Here, the difficulties are that all such individuals or groups have not the resources to speak from the margin.

Swamiji dreamt of new Indian society with the toiling masses on the top.³ Man-making was one of the prime concerns of Swamiji. He had profound sympathy for every man especially for those who are the oppressed, the poor and the backward. In this direction, some messages of Swamiji may be quoted. "Man is divine", "Man is more valuable than all the wealth of the world" etc. were some of his human messages. "Be man and make man", was at the center of all his preachings. To Swamiji, there was no fundamental difference between man and God. He never called man a "Sinner". He believed that man always travels from truth to truth – from lower truth to higher truth. He wanted to convey the message that to serve man is to serve God. He declared, "Man-making is my mission." Swamiji made it clear that a man should have a heart to feel, a head to think and hands to work. Suffice to say that the accumulation of ideal men and women will lead to the formation of an ideal nation.⁴ He looked upon the neglect of the masses as a national sin. He repeatedly asserted, "Remember that the nation lives in the cottage." He wanted to regenerate India through the working of the masses. He had enough confidence in the toiling masses of India. He had great faith in the ability of the downtrodden and the exploited people of India. The messages of Swamiji had been inspiring to some of the patriots like Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo, Subhas Chandra et al.

Some of the utterances of Swamiji show the liberal attitude presented by the Hinduism. According to Swamiji, Hinduism excludes none. For this very reason, Swamiji utters, "The ignorant Indian, the poor and destitute Indian, the Brahmin Indian, the Pariah Indian, is my brother." He farther asserted, "The Indian is my brother, the Indian is my life. India's Gods and Goddesses are my God, India's society is the cradle of my infancy, the pleasure-garden of my youth, the sacred heaven, the Varanasi of my old age." Swamiji's patriotism knows no bounds. As a result, he often said, "The soil of India is my highest Heaven, the good of India is my good".⁵

It is unique in Swamiji that he always discovered God in men and women. To him, the only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course, all animals are the temples. But, man is the highest, the TajMahal of temples. Swamiji explained, "If I cannot worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage." Swamiji further asserted, "Him I call a Mahatman whose heart bleeds for the poor; otherwise he is a Duratman. So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them." According to Swamiji, everybody should see God in the poor, and it is for his salvation that he should go and worship them. The poor and the miserable are for their salvation, so that they may serve the Lord in the shape of the distressed, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, the sinner. Swamiji's attitude to life and death is tinged with the element of humanity. Swamiji said, "Any expansion is life, all construction is death. All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. He who loves lives, he who is selfish is dying. Therefore love for love's sake because, it is the only law of life".⁶

4. Social Practice of the Study:

The North- Eastern part of India is consisted of different tribal communities. Each community has its unique socio-cultural and tradition. Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the North-Eastern region of India. Its total area is 83,743 sq.km. According to the census of 2011, Arunachal Pradesh has a total population of 13,83,727 with a density of 17 people per sq.km. The state is the home of 26 major and more than 110 minor tribes. Among these tribes, majority of the people belong to Christian religion. Most of them are the converted Christian. Formerly, most of those people were Hindus. Till today, the process of conversion continues. Why are the Hindus converted to Christianity the answers are manifold. Firstly, the Christian missionaries have set up English medium schools in the tribal areas. The result is that



the people belonging to the weaker section of society can easily send their children to these schools. Secondly, on many occasions, jobs and financial assistance are provided with the poor tribals. As a consequence, they are easily converted into Christianity. Thirdly, it is a pity that in Hindu religion, sometimes, the tribals are treated as the untouchable. But, Christianity enables them to get rid of the curse of untouchability. Above all, the Christians never offer the stigma of the dalit to the tribals.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Hinduism was far from being traditional. On the floor of the international congress of religion Swamiji gave a new dimension to Hinduism. 11 September, 1893 was a red lettered day in the spiritual History of India. On that day, in his opening speech, Swamiji addressed the learned audience in the Parliament of Religion as, "Sisters and brothers of America." This hearty call fascinated the western world. People began to call him as the cyclonic monk. On 19 September, Swamiji spoke of Hinduism and its multiple aspects. He pointed out that down the ages, the Hindus have protected and sheltered the refugees of the world. In no way, Hinduism tolerates exclusion of any kind. Besides, tolerance and universal acceptance lie at the center of Hindu religion. Again, Hinduism has no confrontation with Buddhism. According to Swamiji, Buddha had a message for the East and he has a message for the West. In the closing ceremony of the Parliament of Religion, Swamiji said, "Help and not Fight, Assimilation and not Destruction, Harmony and Peace and not Dissension".⁷ Years later, Ramakrishna Mission and Ashram has been following the footprints of Swamiji. It has been scattering the light of education and culture among the poorest of the poor tribal boys and girls. Besides, the Mission has engaged all its efforts to bring back the tribals to the main stream of society. It is a great expectation that in the coming days, the tribals will be able to make their journey from the periphery to the centre. They will no longer be treated as the marginalized section of society.

It has been pointed out earlier that Swamiji did not use Hinduism in its narrow sense. To him, Hinduism denotes a favourable religious condition which may be applied to one and all. It is a matter of hope that in the recent time, the tendency of conversion has been reduced to a large extent. Several factors are responsible for the recent trend. Firstly, Arunachal Pradesh shares its border with China and Bhutan. As a result, in this state, the presence of the military is very much visible. The soldiers are mostly the Hindus. They celebrate the Hindu festivals with pomp and grandeur. Such practices influence the tribals by and large. Secondly, with the emergence of the soldiers in this border state, Hinduism has got back its lost grandeur even among the tribals. Thirdly, the central government and the state government have strong faith upon Hinduism. So, in an indirect way, they encourage the spread of Hindu religion all over the state. The tribals cannot be an exception to this observation. Above all, gradually, the tribals are disillusioned of the so-called enlightenment of the Christian missionaries. They gradually come back under the umbrella of Hinduism.

It is known to all that Arunachal Pradesh is the land of the tribals. Here, among the practicing religions, Buddhism⁸ demands special mention. Many of the tribals are Buddhist by faith. It is so happened because their ancestors had come from China and Tibet. Suffice to say that in both the countries, Buddhism is the practicing religion of the majority of the population. In Arunachal Pradesh, most of the tribals villages have a monastery where Buddhist scriptures are preserved with utmost care and devotion. On many occasions, the culture of the tribals reflects Buddhist rituals. The folk of the Mompas⁹ may be cited as a glaring instance in point. Dance¹⁰ constitutes an integral part of life of the Mompas. Dances are the expression of people's inner feelings of happiness and emotion. It is the mode of giving a moral lesson of society. In the Mompa dialect, dance is called, 'Cham' and the dancers are known as 'Champa'. Religious pantomimes celebrate religious ceremonies. Some of the popular Mompa dances include Lhamo Dance, Yak Dance¹¹, Lion Dance, Deer Dance etc.

5. Significance of the Study

In the present dissertation, efforts have been engaged to analyse the factors that are responsible for the marginalization of the tribals. Firstly, the tribals always live on the margin of society. In other words, they do exist in the periphery. They have hardly any knowledge regarding the happenings of mainstream society. The Geographical remoteness makes them isolated and cornered. Secondly, the tribals are the poorest of the poor. They have hardly the resources of living. They inhabit in the forest and live on hunting and farming. So, from economical point of view, they are marginalised. Thirdly, the culture of the tribals differs from the denizens of the land. As a consequence, they gradually become cornered in the domain of culture. Fourthly, Swamiji's notion of Hinduism is capable enough to bring the tribals within the orbit of Hindu religion. Above all it is a pity that even in the 21st century, many people treat the tribals as untouchable. They avoid all sorts of relationship with the tribals. The result is that gradually, the tribals become the subalterns.

It is mostly accepted from time immemorial, the tribals are the sons of the soil of India. But, with the advent of the Aryans, they are lost into the wilderness of forgetfulness. They had been compelled to accept the status of the tribals. They had also been driven away from the localities. They were forced to take shelter in the forest and the hills. Since then, the tribals have hardly any connectivity with the main land. The ups and downs of dynasty hardly affect



their fate. Even, the so-called enlightened British monarchy fails to bring them into the light of civilization and modernization. The consequence is that till date, the tribals have remained isolated from the progress and prosperity of India. Again, India has achieved enormous success in the field of science and technology. But, it has nothing to do with the life of the tribals. Besides, it is another reality that India is one of the largest economies of the world. But, even today, neither riches nor wealth enter their life. Socially, politically, economically and even historically, the tribals are mostly neglected. Under the pretext of modesty and welfare, they are still tortured, tormented and exploited by the majority at large.

6. Findings :

While preparing this paper, I have found the following revelations. Firstly, Swami Vivekananda had been a great humanist. From the core of his heart, he succeeded to realize that to serve man is to serve God. He was ever ready even to sacrifice himself for the cause of humanity. In the real sense, the attitude of Swamiji had been socialist.¹² He wanted equality for one and all. Swamiji loved everyone irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Secondly, Swamiji apprehended that India would never be prosperous without the upliftment of the downtrodden or the subalterns.¹³ In the eyes of Swamiji, there was no difference between a Brahmin and a Pariah. In his opinion, in the presence of backwardness no progress will be possible. Thirdly, the dalits or the tribals were of great importance to this Hindu monk. He properly located that poverty was the major crisis faced by the tribals. In his own way, Swamiji suggested a series of majors for the removal of poverty from the life of the weaker sections of society. Fourthly, Swamiji spoke of the liberalism and broad mindedness presented by the Hindu religion. With the help of so many arguments, Swamiji proved that Hinduism does not support untouchability. Fifthly, light has been thrown on the factors that have compelled the tribals to be converted into Christianity. Sixthly, it has also been discussed that for some reasons, the rate of conversion has been reduced considerably. Now, so many tribals have been showing their interest to remain under the umbrella of Hindu religion.

7. Concluding On :

A series of measures may be taken for the overall improvement of the standard of living of the tribals. Firstly, the light of education should be spread among all the tribals. In the presence of illiteracy, no development is possible education may enable them to get rid of their typical superstitions. Again, education may play a crucial role in their social and political empowerment. Secondly, training should be organized on a regular basis so that the majority of the tribals may be transformed into modern farmers. Modernization of agriculture will certainly enrich their rural economy. Thirdly, self help groups may be from among the tribals so that they may come out of the curse of poverty. Fourthly, sincere efforts should be made to stop the conversion of the tribals. Fifthly, their culture should be preserved with due importance as it is an essential part of Indian culture and tradition. Finally, the messages of Swamiji should be translated into local tribal languages so that the aboriginals may get the flavour of Hindu religion and its liberalism. We all should feel love, sympathy and solidarity for the reibals who are the denizens of this antique land.

With the passage of time, the conditions of the tribals have been improved by and large. The rate of literacy has indeed being increased. The government has taken some effective measures to preserve their cultured, tradition, festivals and so on. The reservation policy of the government of India has enabled many tribals to be engaged in the job sectors. Again, with the formation of self help gropes, efforts have been engaged to improve their economic condition. But, poverty is still a major crisis faced by the tribals. Lots of things are yet to be done to bring the tribals into the mainstream of Indian society. The messages of Swamiji may be a land mark in this direction. They may provide the tribals with strength, inspiration and direction, at the hour of crisis. The humanitarian attitude of this monk may offer hope and aspiration to the tribals many of whom have lost their direction into the wilderness of life. They have even forsaken their traditional Hindu religion. They embrace Christianity in the expectation of better life. But, now, they have to be disillusioned of their so-called better life. Hinduism can show them the life of eternity. The works done by the Ramakrishna mission in the tribal areas, are the embodiments of the messages of Swamiji. India owes much to Swami Vivekananda, but so does the world. Swamiji often said, "Truth is my God and the universe my country." In every sense, he was a citizen of the world. Swamiji had been a great influence to the patriots like Tilak, Aurobindo, Subhas Chandra¹⁴ et al. In the words of Bipen Chandra Pal," Vivekanda's message was really the message of modern humanity." Finally, in a limited sense, it may be ob served that Swamiji's dream of the up liftment of the downtrodden people of India has come true. At this juncture, one may recall the recent incident of the election of Draupadi Murmu(the second woman and the first tribal President of India. She took charge on 25th day of July, 2022) to the post of the President of India.



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