



***Recontextualising Caste  
—An Analysis Based on  
Swami Vivekananda’s Views and  
Postcolonial Ideology***

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**T**HAT SWAMI VIVEKANANDA was a great visionary, seer, testifies to the fact that many of his teachings fit into the framework of

contemporary thought currents and movements. The penetrating insights of this great seer found spontaneous expressions from his encounter

with Truth that surpasses the finitude of space and time. He saw the human being as divine and therefore, he dealt with everything pertaining to his ontological being with utmost care and concern. His analysis of the social institution of caste is much scientific and humanistic and it stands on a par with the contemporary debates of the subaltern studies of postcolonialism.

The contention of this paper will of course be futile if Swamiji is found among the lines of the anti-foundationalists or anti-metaphysicians like the postmodernists or poststructuralists. Nevertheless, the parallels that one can draw between Swamiji and the contemporary postcolonialists on their views on marginalised sections of the society are worth discussing.

### **The Project of Postcolonialism**

The prefix 'post' in postcolonialism is ambivalent for it could signify a historical marker as well as a critique of colonialism. "The term postcolonial itself operates in at least two different registers at once: it is a historical marker referring to the period after decolonization as well as a term signifying alterations in intellectual approaches, particularly those which have been influenced by post-structuralism and deconstruction."<sup>1</sup>

[Postcolonialism] involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledge, as well as needs, developed outside the West. ... It ... comprises a related set of perspectives ... involves issues ... to do with the position of women, of development, of ecology, of social justice, of socialism in its broadest sense. Above all, postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledge into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world. ... Its radical agenda is to demand equality and well-being for all human beings on this earth.<sup>2</sup>

Swamiji had an intimate knowledge of such Western movements as socialism, capitalism, and communism from their literature as well as from personal contacts. These movements were at that time in their infancy and even their propounders had no great hopes for the ideologies they advocated. Swamiji could see clearly the very purpose of the colonial rule of the British in India, the weaknesses and failures of the Indian mindset—along with their strength and triumph—and also the prototype of the contemporary ideology, postcolonialism, which very much echoes in his lectures on 'Modern India', 'A Plan of Work for India', and so on. It is remarkable to see that an orientalist as Swamiji prophesied at that distant date that "socialism of some form was coming on the boards" and that the Shudras as *Shudras* would be the future ruling caste.<sup>3</sup>

### **Caste: Indian Version of Institutionalised Inequality**

The Indian version of institutionalised inequality and indignity projects itself as the caste system with privileges for some and degradation for others. The pursuit of social justice is the primary objective of democracy. However, what we have today in the name of modernity and technological development is crony capitalism.

The link between colonialism and capitalism needs to be spelt out at this juncture. Ania Loomba notes 'that colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism.'<sup>4</sup> Swamiji's observations are worth quoting here:

The idea is being formed in the minds of the English public that the passing away of the Indian Empire from their sway will end in imminent peril to the English nation, and be their ruin. So, by any means whatsoever, the supremacy of England must be maintained in India. The way to effect this, they think, is by

keeping uppermost in the heart of every Indian the mighty prestige and glory of the British nation. It gives rise to both laughter and tears simultaneously to observe how this ludicrous and pitiful sentiment is gaining ground among the English, and how they are steadily extending their *modus operandi* for the carrying out of this sentiment into practice. It seems as if the Englishmen resident in India are forgetting that so long as that fortitude, that perseverance, and that intense national unity of purpose, by which Englishmen have earned this Indian Empire—and that ever wide-awake commercial genius aided by science, which has turned even India, the mother of all riches, into the principal mart of England—so long as these characteristics are not eliminated from their national life, their throne in India is unshakable.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to analyse the above-mentioned quotation of Swamiji against the backdrop of contemporary postmodern thinkers. 'Postmodern theory in general rejects the modern equation of reason and freedom and attempts to problematize modern forms of rationality as reductive and oppressive. ... Foucault stigmatizes modern rationality, institutions, and forms of subjectivity as sources or constructs of domination.'<sup>6</sup> The Enlightenment project had disastrous consequences for the rest of the world because it glossed over and erased differences, even genuine and authentic ones, in a bid to ruthlessly homogenise and verify all systems under the banner of science and reason. As a result, the non-Westerners were seen as 'the other'—the unscientific and the irrational. Foucault argues that one 'of the Enlightenment's tasks was to multiply reason's political powers'.<sup>7</sup>

In the postcolonial India how we Indians measure progress is beautifully expressed by Swamiji:

The spell of imitating the West is getting such a strong hold upon you that what is good or what

is bad is no longer decided by reason, judgment, discrimination, or reference to the Shastras. Whatever ideas, whatever manners the white men praise or like are good; whatever things they dislike or censure are bad. ... O India! With this mere echoing of others, with this base imitation of others, with this dependence on others, this slavish weakness, this vile detestable cruelty—wouldst thou, with these provisions only, scale the highest pinnacle of civilisation and greatness? ... Say, brother: 'The soil of India is my highest heaven, the good of India is my good.'<sup>8</sup>

It is a truism that postcolonialism 'resists all forms of exploitation (environmental as well as human) and all oppressive conditions that have been developed solely for the interests of corporate capitalism. ... It stands for empowering the poor, the dispossessed, and the disadvantaged, for tolerance of difference and diversity, for the establishment of minorities' rights, women's rights, and cultural rights within a broad framework of democratic egalitarianism.'<sup>9</sup> Swamiji was not much enamoured of a mere economic equality; he rather stood for a cultural and spiritual fraternity in which there would not only be economic socialism and political freedom, but also moral and intellectual kinship.

### **Casteism—A Hindrance to Progress**

To Swamiji's vision, the shudras, the pariahs, were the proletariat of India, and the Indian socialism was to be conceived in terms of their betterment. True, he could not condemn caste outright, for caste fundamentally, was a 'glorious social institution', and any future society must recognise its intrinsic worth (5.198). But he had no love for the hereditary caste system which is a hindrance to progress. He said: 'Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress. It narrows, restricts, separates' (ibid.).

The importance of discourse may be discussed in this context. Discourse is thought

of as language in use and is considered to be both the product and manifestation of particular social conditions, class structures, and power relationships that alter in the course of history.<sup>10</sup> Colonial discourse revolved around the myths of power, the race classifications, and the imagery of subordination. The difference in the discourse of caste and casteism is the root cause of marginalisation and degradation of a section of the Indian society. Caste is a natural order, though casteism, in the modern sense of the term, is not.

Swamiji's explanation of caste is exactly on the lines of postcolonial discourse: 'In Sanskrit, Jati, i.e. species. Now, this is the first idea of creation. Variation (Vichitrata), that is to say Jati, means creation. "I am One, I become many" (various Vedas). Unity is before creation, diversity is creation. Now if this diversity stops, creation will be destroyed. ... Now the original idea of Jati was this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his Prakriti, his Jati, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years. ... Then what was the cause of India's downfall?—the giving up of this idea of caste. ... The present caste is not the real Jati, but a hindrance to its progress.'<sup>11</sup>

Swamiji makes it clear that caste has nothing to do with religion: 'Soul has no caste, and to think it has is a delusion' (7.34). Again he says: 'When this feeling of the all-round good of all without respect for caste or colour will awaken in your heart, then I shall know you are advancing towards the ideal' (7.236).

### **Decentring or Recontextualisation of Caste**

Postmodernism or postcolonialism is nothing but decentring. It can be decentring of power, knowledge, ideas, or anything. It never allows privileges but promotes decentring or

recontextualisation, which allows free play of meanings, ideas, or power relations. Its very aim is to find the binary oppositions like the rich and the poor, the coloniser and the colonised, the privileged and the underprivileged, the capitalists and the proletariats, and identify which one is central and which one is marginal and then to allow a free play of the two. The very advantage of this scheme of thought is that it resists inequalities of any type and it never destroys anything. Rather, it gives room for local narratives in place of grand narratives, respects all, maintains equality and justice, and finds room for multicultural practices and diverse functions.

Viewed in the above light it may be said that Swamiji's approach towards caste is a kind of deconstruction. It is never destruction but recontextualisation. He says: 'What you call the Jati dharma is quite contrary to what we have in fact. ... Try to bring back the true Jati dharma and then it will be a real and sure boon to the country' (5.456–7).

Swamiji explains the methodology of decentralisation in the following terms: 'The solution is not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level of the higher. ... The ideal at one end is the Brahmin and the ideal at the other end is the Chandala, and the whole work is to raise the Chandala up to the Brahmin' (3.295).

Swamiji is of the opinion that there is no country in the world without caste and in India, from caste we reach to the point where there is no caste. It is worth noticing that Swamiji had a message for the different castes: 'To the Brahmins I appeal, that they must work hard to raise the Indian people by teaching them what they know ... It is clearly the duty of the Brahmins of India to remember what real Brahminhood is' (3.297). Again he said: 'To the non-brahmin castes I

say, wait, be not in a hurry. Do not seize every opportunity of fighting the Brahmin' (3.298); 'the only way to raise your condition is to study Sanskrit ... The only way to bring about the levelling of caste is to appropriate the culture, the education which is the strength of the higher castes' (3.291).

The legitimate fructification of caste as the most glorious Indian institution becomes illegitimate and destructive if it is based on a super arrogated excellence of birth. The voice of the subaltern remains unheard within the colonial discourse as well as the discourse of casteism. But the postcolonial discourses and endeavours shall be a striving for raising their voices that Swamiji puts as follows: 'Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad' (4.367).

Postcolonialism, in fact, presents an occasion for thinking the concept of progress. In the postcolonial period, progress is to be measured using the parameters of justice, equality, and liberty. But the question is: What is the founding principle upon which these glaring ideals can be realised? Whereas for the Western postmodern and postcolonial thinkers this can be achieved through a shift from grand narrative to local narratives, for thinkers like Swamiji, true progress can be achieved only if society is rooted in the spiritual and cultural foundations of truth. As a spiritual humanist, Swamiji asserted the resplendent glory of human nature. He said: 'Love alone is the fittest thing to survive' (3.188). In his view an ideal egalitarian society is not a mere theoretical concept but one which can be best established with the collaboration of the different classes. 'If it is possible to form a state in which the knowledge of the priest period, the culture of the military, the distributive spirit of the commercial, and the ideal of equality of the

last can all be kept intact, minus their evils, it will be an ideal state' (6.381).

### Conclusion

Rereading Swamiji along the lines of postcolonialism makes it clear that his views on the distortion of caste, the rising power of the shudras, the need of the power of the Indians to discriminate the glory of the fleeting materialistic capitalistic tradition of the West from the eternal and elevating spiritual culture of their own motherland, and the recontextualisation and not the destruction of caste system, are much significant for the progress of today's India, which is passing through its postcolonial period. 

### References

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