

Vivekananda's Re-Interpretation of Religion

Ashwin Parijat Anshu

Asst. Prof, Zakir Husain Delhi College

Main Theme

Swami Vivekananda's lectures in America and the West in general is marked by a pervasive use of a language of science to represent Vedantic thoughts and ideas. He spoke extensively on how religion in modern times will not only will have to conform to requirements of science and that 'faith' in God in the sense of a creator of the universe was severely undermined.¹ He argued that unless religion was based on a verified body of knowledge such as modern science represented, it would lose its relevance in modern lives and become only a bundle of creeds and dogmas resorted to by unthinking minds. As a representative of Hinduism in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago 1893, such a stand about 'religion' in the modern world came as a huge 'shock' to many of his audience among whom included not only fairly 'orthodox' men and women but also those who had been influenced by the modern rationalist thought represented by thinkers like Mills, Hume, Spencer and Comte and the equally revolutionary scientific ideas of Darwin and others. But It was precisely Vivekananda's reconciliation of religion or statement of religion, specifically, Hindu thought and modern science that marked him out as a global representative of modern Hinduism and as a thinker who was modern and yet one who differed from western modernity. It is this slippery nature of Vivekananda in the interstices of modern thought, neither quite 'modern' in the western sense nor 'traditional', that has been responsible for both celebration and denunciation of Swami Vivekananda . This was probably one of the most vital aspects of his engagement with the west and even today it continues to be one that makes Swami Vivekananda so relevant to our times.

Main Proposition

There is a need for a thorough shaking up of location of Vivekananda moment in modern Indian history. First, Vivekananda needs to be read in the context of global cultural discourses that framed India and much of Indian thought. Secondly, he needs to be also read in the context of convergences and divergences in the nineteenth century that marked the social, intellectual and the spiritual fervent among Indians conscious about the way Indians had been framed by the west. All too often Swami Vivekananda is abstracted away from one or the other of these contexts and shown to be a product of one more than the other or against the other, almost a thinker hopelessly contradictory and divided.

It is argued that his invocation of science was neither apologetic borrowing of western understanding nor a reversal of Orientalist discourse to claim superiority of spiritual east over materialist west but a fervent attempt to fragment the narrative of modernity to make it inclusive.² While western modernity has found it quite unproblematic to claim the legacy of the classical Greek and Roman worlds in its genealogy and in fact claimed it as its foundation, India's past had not only been excluded from any place in the genealogy of the modern but anyone who has sought to reclaim that past has been seen with deep suspicion. India's past has

¹ 'Reason and Religion', Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 1, Advaita Ashram, Kolkata, p. 376

² The view that Vivekananda can be understood in terms of an apologetic defence of Hinduism through claims that Hindu thought had anticipated several aspects of modern scientific thought has been put forward by critics like Agehananda Bharati and Paul Hacker; Agehanada Bharati, 'The Hindu renaissance and its apologetic Pattern', The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 29, No. 2 (Feb., 1970), pp. 267-287 ; Wilhelm Halbfass ed., *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, SUNY, New York, 1995

been seen almost as an 'other' in intellectual terms, not available and out of bounds for India and world's present. Swami Vivekananda's invocation of Indian thought and his attempt to read it in the light of modern discourses of universal science was an attempt to break this exclusion of India's past and hence by implication India itself from modernity. It de-stigmatised and de-exoticised a whole layer of Indian consciousness that had laid beneath the surface of modernity imbibed by Indians and with which Indians were struggling to come to terms with right from the days of Ram Mohan Roy. It opened the doors for Indians to be both moderns and Indians unapologetically.

In a significant way, in a global sense, Swami Vivekananda sought to also question the exclusion of cultural imaginations that stood outside the frame of universalistic and in many ways colonial science. Kant's 'thing in itself' and Spencer's 'unknowable' had closed the lids on a whole range of ways of conceptualising and imagining physical, social and moral universe that had been a source of meaning to ideas of self and being. Vivekananda asserted invoking science itself that there was more to this universe than what science was willing to admit. And further, that 'more' was in many ways equally if not more important than the layer of consciousness admitted by science. This assertion was profoundly liberating to many who had found the iron chains of 'disenchantment' numbing and oppressive. It was this aspect of Swami Vivekananda's affirmation of the validity of 'religion' that won him many admirers and followers in the west and continues to do so. In this sense it was a vital aspect of the way he sought to reorient and re-enchant modernity.

He sought both to underline the similarity of science and religion as human quests at the same time pointed out the pitfalls if either became hegemonic and totalitarian. Unlike Weber and other later theorists, he did not see rationality and its ordering of the world either as an inevitability or as an end in itself but accepted the vital instrumental benefits of rationality as a form of thought. His representation of Hinduism and the passion with which he emphasised its difference from western forms of religiosity encapsulated several themes that suggested that there were multiple pathways towards a world where each individual was free to pursue his/ her own idea of truth.

Engaging with Vivekananda's Critics

The 'hermeneutics of suspicion' has been acutely directed against Vivekananda for his bold attempt to use the language of science to represent Indian thought and the idea of religion in modern world. A whole range of scholars from Indologists, to sociologists to scholars of religion and cultural studies not to mention history have found his deployment of an imagery of science highly problematic at best and dubious, distorting and Hindu supremacist at worst. One can mention names like J.N. Farquhar, Aghananda Bharati, Wilhelm Halbfass, Paul Hacker, Vivien Baumfield, Dermot Killingley, David Miller, Colin Mackenzie Brown and range of others both in India and the west. Aghananda Bharati, an influential discussant of 'Indian/Hindu Renaissance' in the west, coined the phrase 'pizza effect' as a trope to categorise the derivative and manufactured nature of Hindu Renaissance and its claims of the 'scientific' validity of ancient Indian thought.³ According to him, the most charismatic figure who introduced this pattern of 'apologetic' in India and from whom other Indians have taken their cue was Swami Vivekananda. Wilhelm Halbfass and Paul hacker similarly have argued that far from being a representative of traditional Indian thought, Vivekananda was a shrewd appropriator of western discourse of science who then located it in traditional Indian thought thereby distorting and changing its very nature. Halbfass argues that Indians like Vivekananda who had imbibed western values owing to the very 'unequal hermeneutical situation' they found themselves vis-a-vis the west were fundamentally unsuited as authentic interpreters of

³ Aghanada Bharati, op. cit.

Indian tradition.⁴ Paul hacker has argued that the 'Practical Vedanta' that Vivekananda propagated in the west far from being the Advaita of Shankara which was purely an otherworldly thought was a poor caricature of the same bearing the influence of modern nationalism, Schopenhaurian thought and Comtean Positivism all coming from the West.

A key problem in western understanding of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition in general seems to be the essentialisation and homogenisation of the category of 'Indian tradition' and abstracting it out of the frame of history. A number of scholars have sought to examine Vivekananda's representation of Hinduism by comparing his utterances with 'authentic' Hindu traditions such as Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya. They argue that he interwove a number of themes and values borrowed from the west thus manufacturing an artificial and hybrid Hinduism against surviving traditional Hinduism. Paul hacker used the term 'Neo-Hinduism' to represent the ideological, political nature of discourse of religion by all western educated Indians in the nineteenth century and after including Swami Vivekananda. The question then arises was there ever a religion hermetically sealed from historical processes of change? Is not religion also a site where issues of power and domination is played out and contested? Was not religion (evident in pejorative words such as 'heathens' to represent non-Christians) part of the apparatus of domination deployed by the colonisers to keep the colonised subjugated as Jean Comaroff has brilliantly shown in the African context?⁵ It is my contention that the 'critics' of Vivekananda have been much less keen to engage with these questions and not been sensitive to hear the voices that Vivekananda sought to foreground. I think that is why Vivekananda famously said prophetically 'I have a message to deliver to the West'!

Colonialism, Religion and Science in Nineteenth Century India

Ram Mohan Roy wrote to Lord Amherst in 1823 protesting against the foundation of Sanskrit college in Calcutta that it would only be expected to 'load the minds of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessor' and appealed instead to 'instruct the natives in mathematics, natural philosophy, Chemistry, anatomy, and other useful sciences which the nations of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection.' Seventy years later in 1893 Swami Vivekananda spoke while delivering his speech on Hinduism in the Parliament of Religion, 'From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion...Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal. Thus Chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all others could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfil its services in discovering one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion becomes perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death, Him who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world.' It is evident that the worlds of Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda even though connected were far apart. Science had a different meaning, a different place in the world-views represented by these figures and so did its relationship with religion. To understand this difference it is necessary to locate Vivekananda with respect to global discourses that had entered India with the Raj in the later half of nineteenth century.

Science, Religion and Modernity in Late Nineteenth Century West

The World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 was part of the World Columbian Exposition that sought to showcase American leadership in moral and material

⁴ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe, An Essay in Understanding*, SUNY, New York, 1988

⁵ Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People*, University of Chicago Press, 1985

achievement, its position akin to the Romans in their heyday. Religion was part of the modernity that the organisers of this Parliament sought to impress the non-Christian non-western world. In other words, both science and religion was part of the claim of western dominance. It is not surprising therefore that representatives from the 'Orient' like Swami Vivekananda, and Dharmapala, chose to challenge the idea of western moral dominance by invoking science. This was because developments in science and its shaping of emerging mentalities had shaken the doctrinal foundations of religion in the West. John Stuart Mill did not need the 'Darwinian evolutionary theory to refute much of Christianity as it existed in the west in his 'Three essays of Religion' in 1873. Thus rejecting the idea that Christianity was a gift bestowed on a 'chosen' people he wrote, 'there is one moral contradiction inseparable from every form of Christianity, which no ingenuity can resolve, and no sophistry explain away. It is, that so precious a gift, bestowed on a few, should have been withheld from the many: that countless millions of human beings should have been allowed to live and die, to sin and suffer, without the one thing needful, the divine remedy for sin and suffering, which it would have cost the Divine Giver as little to have vouchsafed to all, as to have bestowed by special grace upon a favoured minority.' Robert Ingersoll, a very popular American orator and an agnostic wrote about the Old Testament in 1879, 'for many years I have regarded the Pentateuch simply as record of a barbarous people, in which are found a great number of ceremonies of savagery, many absurd and unjust laws, and thousands of ideas inconsistent with known and demonstrated facts'. Evidently disenchantment and a crisis of faith had set in among those who had hitherto derived spiritual solace from Christian discourses. Science then could act as a further solvent of western spiritual domination that had sought the transformation of the world into a field to harvest heathen souls and make them fit for salvation. No doubts attempts began to be made in the west to appropriate science for the cause of Christianity and to save the sinking ship of western spiritual dominance. In the World Parliament of Religions a number of papers were presented invoking science in the service of Revelation and the Gospel. Vivekananda's paper on Hinduism in the Parliament was a masterly response to discourses he had seen and heard.

Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of Religion

Ideas about universal religion had been floated by Christian apologists as well as rationalist thinkers to resurrect the ebbing tide of religion. A prominent note of the World Parliament of religions was the idea of 'Universal Brotherhood' based on the 'Fatherhood' of God deploying Christian theological ideas. Comte and Mill had on the other hand raised the banner of 'religion of humanity' as a substitute for religions that invoked supernatural being. Vivekananda sought to inscribe Indian thought into this vision of a humane modern world by developing a third alternative: the idea of a universal religion based on the recognition of divinity of man itself. He accepted the rationalist idea that faith without the evidence provided by science was not viable or justified. At the same time he rejected utilitarian and positivist argument that 'reason' or 'enlightened self-interest' could provide powerful enough motives for human beings to feel for and have empathy with other human beings. He posed the awkward and uncomfortable question; 'Why should men not rob and kill others if it made them happy?' According to him the only answer lay in directing human minds to erase the difference between the 'self' and the 'other' and this could only be done by Vedantic ethics with its idea of *Tat Tvam Asi*. In lecture after lecture, he developed the idea how Vedanta could not only explain the known facts of universe but also create a new order of society where religion would no longer be needed as an institutional and denominational force but as moral, ethical and spiritual force. He believed that if any civilisation that could meet this need for a set of ideas to address the anomalies of western modernity, it was Indian, and this formed the crux of his engagement with the West.



Traditional Ramlila of Varanasi

Dr. Ashwin Parijat Anshu

Assistant Professor, Dept of History, Zakir Husain Delhi College, Delhi University

The annual reenactment of the Ramayana story or Ramlila is among the world's most popular dramatic traditions. 'Ramlila' literally means 'Rama's sport'. Here *lila* has a special theological meaning signifying the spontaneous action of the Divine which creates and drives this cosmos as well as his incarnations in this world.¹ Rama's exemplary life of virtue and his victory over Ravana, the subject matter of Ramayana are regarded as his divine sport or *lila* in the bhakti tradition. Traditionally, Ramlila has been performed as a series of folk play around the Dassehra festival in which local communities and neighborhoods participate directly. As a collective performance in which people recreate the episodes narrated in the epic Ramayana, Ramlila is at the very heart of a living and dynamic tradition that has deeply influenced Indian culture and even beyond.² But it has a special place in north India where Ramcharitmanas is one of the most popular religious and literary texts. While new dialogues have been written for Ramlilas over the ages, still at its core Ramlilas in north India are a dramatic performance of Ramcharitmanas which had retold the Ramayana epic in vernacular Hindi in the sixteenth century.

The uniqueness of Varanasi Ramlilas

While Ramlilas are performed in many towns and cities, in Varanasi it has a special flavour for many reasons. It is in Varanasi that Tulsidas is said to have started the Ramlila, permeated with the bhakti idea of divine taking human form in the person of Ram to restore order and justice in society.³ While it is difficult to confirm this conclusively, nevertheless the Ramlilas of Chitrakut, Lat Bhairav and at Assi in Varanasi are indeed quite a few centuries old and they continue the tradition that are supposed to have begun without any change. They thus represent a cultural heritage of immense value in our times. In the nineteenth century, the rulers of Banaras patronized Ramlila in a big way naming their capital as 'Ramnagar' ('the City of Ram') and transforming it into a live stage for the performance of a thirty-one day Ramlila.⁴ This Ramlila has ever since become the most famous Ramlila attracting huge audiences every year that include numerous sadhus and pilgrims who flock to this Ramlila with great devotion. So deep has been the influence of Ramcharitmanas that many mohallas (neighbourhoods) produce their own Ramlila and localities have come to be identified by the episodes they organise. The sacred geography of Ramayana is writ large on the cultural and geographical landscape of Varanasi. By a rough estimate no less than sixty Ramlilas are performed in different mohallas, each organized by local Ramlila Committees whose major funds come from the locality itself.

The special thing about the Ramlilas of Varanasi is that unlike Ramlilas in other parts of India, they are not ten-day proscenium performance by professionals but almost a month

¹ A helpful study of the concept of 'lila' in India's performance tradition is William Sax, *Gods at Play, Lila in South Asia*, OUP, New York, 1995

² An excellent study of various performance traditions and styles that Ramlila encompasses is Induja Awasthi, *Ramlila, Parampara aur Shailiyani*, Rdhakrishna Prakashan, 1979

³ References to the beginnings of Ramlila being attributed to Tulsidas are ubiquitous in oral tradition as also in studies such as Norvein Hein, *The Miracle Plays of Mathura*, Yale University Press, USA, 1972

⁴ One of the best known studies of Ramlila of Ramnagar is Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims and Gods, The Ramlila of Ramnagar*, Seagull, USA, 1990