

A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION ON SPIRITUAL VALUE DURING INDIAN RENAISSANCE

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Abstract:

The familiar thread of religious, social, and intellectual reform movements from the monotheistic reformist agenda of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), leaders of the Brahmo and Arya Samaj movements, to the aesthetic nationalism of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), and finally to the contested visions of spiritual and secular nationalism of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), Iswarchadra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). From these legend Nationalist's movement, we wrest some grand philosophical insight about the metaphysics of freedom from what is essentially a cursory recapping of key moments in the emergence of India's national consciousness. Spirituality is much wider than any particular religion and represents man's seeking for the eternal, the divine, the greater self, the source of unity and his attempt to arrive at some equation, some increasing approximation of the values of human life with the eternal and divine values. Nor do we mean the exclusion of anything whatsoever from our scope, of any of the great aims of human life, or of the problems of the modern world.

Keywords: Spirituality, Renaissance, value, philosophy, harmony

Introduction: The word "Renaissance" signifies a revival or rebirth of learning and culture. It is all about the philosophy and culture during Indian Renaissance. Throughout history, there have been important moments and significant movements that have played a key role in awakening what has been dormant in a nation, its core source of culture and identity. The vision of the great philosophies and religions can yet embrace and fertilise each other, the

multi-dimensional perfection of man rests in harmony of philosophical ways that include the spiritual radiance of Hinduism, the submission of Islam, the noble compassion of Buddhism, the austerity of Jainism, the missionary passion of Christianity and the purity of Sufism.¹

India has had, in its core, spirituality. Hence it is of no surprise that all great movements of life in India have begun with a new spiritual thought and usually a new religious activity. The Brahmo Samaj had in its beginning a large cosmopolitan, even eclectic, idea; the attempts to restate the Vedanta, through its three stages, recapitulated the three motives of the Indian religious mind, Jnana, Bhakti and Karma. The Arya Samaj tried to reinterpret and apply the Vedic principles of life to modern conditions. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement has been a wide synthesis of past religious motives and spiritual experiences topped by the old asceticism and monasticism but combined with a strong humanitarianism and missionary zeal. There has been too an orthodox Hindu revivalism. We, however, see everywhere the tendency towards the return of the spirit upon life. Probably, here lies the key of the Indian Renaissance.

The leaders of Indian Renaissance: Indian renaissance is the way to stem the declining values in society and rethink the relationship between politics and culture. Indian renaissance is also called the socio intellectual revolution that took place in the 19th century. The change is happening in different fields like science and an important part of this renaissance was reforming Hinduism. The leaders of Indian renaissance are Annie Besant, Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Iswarchadra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Virchand Gandhi, Baba Amte and many more. Among

¹ Ghatak D , *Relevance of Spiritual Thoughts in Radhakrishnana Philosophy*, p.113, Edited Book by Dr D. Malakr, 2019

them Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of Brahma Samaj is called the father of the Indian Renaissance. This man tirelessly fought against the social evils that are prevailing in Indian society. He was the person who broke many traditions for the sake of society. Child marriage and *sati pratha* are the social barriers that are removed by the man. The effort of this person in these matters helps him to be introduced as the father of Indian Renaissance. Reformist religious associations are conceived by this person as instruments of political and social transformations. Brahma Samaj was also established by this famous person and it played a crucial role in establishing a modern Indian Society. It also helped in suppressing the dowry system, caste system, and improving the educational system. Ram Mohan Roy's impact on modern Indian history was his revival of the pure and ethical principles of the Vedanta school of philosophy as found in the Upanishads. He preached the unity of God, made early translations of Vedic scriptures into English, co-founded the Calcutta Unitarian Society.²

Vidyasagar was one of the best thinkers and social reformers of his time. He spoke on behalf of rationalism and humanism without fully embracing Westernism. His role in education reform and expansion of Bengal was also immense. He authored several textbooks and his contribution to various genres of literature is undeniable. Vidyasagar challenged and raised a strong voice against the social and educational stagnation and superstition of his time. Widow remarriage laws and attempts to ban child marriage and many marriages have given her a great place in the social history of modern India. Vidyasagar was able to awaken and strengthen national pride and patriotism. He never showed any loyalty to the British rulers in

² . The Renaissance in India (1918), pg. 37-66
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199769261.003.0003>

his work. He fought for rationalism, science, and humanism all his life as a true humanist. (Samaddar, 1989). With this strong self-belief, he assumed the role of a social reformer. In view of those times, the unbearable misery of the widows forced him to descend on that land. His social reform revolved around the widow marriage movement. In this case, he was not in the form of an enemy of the scriptures, but he tried to do this rite on the basis of faith in the scriptures. His statement on the subject is that the prohibition of widow marriage is not scriptural, but based on ignorance. Ishwar Chandra's Philosophy of Education was based on humanity. He deeply observed the problems and weakness in the then education system. He knew to change the fate of core of Indians, education is the only weapon (Ghosh 45).

Ramakrishna Paramhansa was a man with a liberal outlook. He firmly believed that there was an underlying unity among all religions and that only the methods of worship were different. God could be approached by any form of worship as long as it was done with single-minded devotion.

Social culture and its degradation are the main cause behind the Indian Renaissance. It has been noticed that over the years undesirable customs and different social evils like idol worship have captured Indian society. These practices create a negative social effect and for removing this Indian Renaissance came into existence. It is the end of these activities and a socio-cultural revolution in many fields like science, and literature.³

The Phases of Indian Renaissance: The first phase of the renaissance in India was embodied in the socio-religious movements, which was mainly, though not exclusively, initiated by the burgeoning middle class, which was schooled in British liberalism. But the

³ Ghosh, Anindita (2002). "Revisiting the 'Bengal Renaissance': Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta". *Economic and Political Weekly*. 42 (37): 4329–4338. JSTOR

intellectuals who spearheaded the movement were not Anglophile Indians. A defining feature of the movement was an inquiry into the past and an assessment of the strength of tradition to overcome contemporary problems. Recall Ram Mohan Roy's use of Hindu scriptures in his debate with his opponents on Sati, or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's widow remarriage campaign, or Narayana Guru's advocacy of universalism. They were all groping for a way out in an "era of darkness". That they struck at the obvious—social obscurantism, religious superstition and irrational rituals—was the natural outcome. Thus, the first phase of the Indian renaissance was predominantly engaged with social and cultural matters, a consequence of which was the relative neglect of the political. In fact, the political did not figure seriously in their thoughts.

In contrast, the second stage was characterised by an attempt to bring together anti-colonial politics and the social quest for modernity. The anti-colonial movement did not follow the renaissance, as is generally assumed; the latter elided into the former, in the sense that the national movement allowed the values of the first phase of the renaissance to form their ideological postures and enter areas where they were conspicuous by their absence. But the national movement took the precaution to keep the struggle on social issues outside its political agenda and to control it through measured interventions. Gandhiji's role in the Vaikom Satyagraha, for instance, was that of a mediator and not a participant, even if his sympathy was with the *satyagrahi* s.

The third phase of the renaissance, which begins with the end of colonial rule, was a result of the confluence of Marxism and the renaissance values. In fact, the renaissance values are inherent in Marxism and were part of the agenda of the communist movement, which

functioned with the notion of cultural and social equality, among caste and gender. This was not a break with the past. The ideas of equality, gender justice and secularism were integral to the first and second phases of the renaissance as well, but with different humanist orientations. The aim of the Left was not so much to “reform”, but to transform the existing cultural and social practices. In doing so, it sought to create a new meaning for the renaissance. Although several leaders of the Left movement realised the importance of culture in popular struggles, they did not succeed in creatively bringing them together. The third phase of the renaissance, as represented by radical cultural activism, therefore, did not really take off, despite a very encouraging beginning in the 1930s. The deleterious effects of this failure have plagued the Left renaissance to the extent that cultural activism has almost become irrelevant in the cultural life of the nation. This is surprising as substantial sections of the creative intelligentsia are broadly left in their intellectual orientation. Many cultural activists and writers have started wondering whether a “Left Renaissance” is possible at all.⁴

Spiritual Nationalism: In 1896, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to propagate social welfare. It laid emphasis not on personal salvation but on social good and social service. The Ramakrishna Mission stood for religious and social reform based on the ancient culture of India. Emphasis was put on the essential spirit of Hinduism and not on rituals. Rendering social service was the primary aim of the Ramakrishna Mission. It believed that serving a human being was the same as worshipping God.

⁴ K.N. Panikkar, Essay, ‘*Three Phases of Indian Renaissance*’, Fronline, 2017,

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According to Sri Aurobinda, India can best develop herself and serve humanity by being herself and following the law of her own nature, by keeping to her own Centre. This does not mean the rejection of everything new that comes to us. Religion has been the central preoccupation of the Indian mind; some have told us that too much religion ruined India. Perhaps so. But if we give religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little. The right remedy is not to belittle the age long ideal of India but to give it a still wider scope. India can, if she will, give a new and decisive turn to the problems over which all mankind is labouring, for the clue to their solution is there in her ancient knowledge. Whether she will rise to the height of her opportunity is the question of her destiny as of the renaissance.

Aurobindo had come to the realisation that Indian society is in a still more chaotic stage; the old forms are crumbling away while the new is still powerless to be born. We have had a loud proclaiming of Westernised reform, but it has failed to carry the people. We have had a revival of orthodox conservatism and have now in emergence an increasing sense of the necessity of a renovation of social ideas and expressive forms by the spirit of the nation awaking to the deeper yet unexpressed implications of its culture. Only a freer national life can give shape to or actualise this possibility.

The renaissance thus determining itself but not yet finally determined, Aurobindo said, must insist on the greater action of the spiritual motive in every sphere of our living. But in some minds there persists a misunderstanding or a refusal to understand the true significance

and content of spirituality. We must therefore try to make clear what we mean by a renaissance governed by the principle of spirituality. Spirit without mind, spirit without body is not the ideal type of man. The ancient Indian culture attached quite as much value to the soundness, growth and strength of the mind, life and body as the old Hellenic or the modern scientific thought, though for a different and a greater motive. There was never a national ideal of poverty as some would have us believe. Spirituality is not necessarily exclusive; it can be and, in its fullness, must be all-inclusive.

The spiritual view holds that the mind, life and body are man's means and not his aims. It sees them as his outer instrumental self and not his whole being. It sees the infinite behind all things, a greater reality than the apparent and it is this that everything else in him must bring out and try to express. It is this that, even in preserving all the aims of human life, gives a different sense and direction to our normal view.

Aurobindo opined that the mental, vital, aesthetic, ethical parts have to be developed because man feels more alive and fulfilled and also because these things too are the expressions of the spirit, a step of our growing into the nature of the Godhead. So, with our other aims and activities: philosophy, science, art, poetry, politics, society and economy. From the spiritual point of view truth of existence is to be found by intuition and inner experience and the work of philosophy is to arrange the data given by the various means of knowledge and put them into their synthetic relation to the one Truth. In this view Science becomes not merely a physical knowledge and its practical fruits but will make room for new fields of research, which start from spirit as the first truth and from the power of mind and what is

greater than mind to act upon life and matter. Art and poetry are seen to be a revelation of greater things concealed in man and Nature and the deepest spiritual and universal beauty.⁵

Even politics, society, economy may become a framework within which man can seek and grow into his real self and divinity; an increasing embodiment of the divine law of being and a collective advance towards the light, power, peace, unity, harmony which the race is trying to evolve. This and nothing more but nothing less is what we mean by the application of spirituality to life.⁶

Conclusion: India's renaissance is significant for both her own future and the future globally because it is India alone who can show humanity a path to a newer, a greater, a deeper and a higher way of being – being in harmony with nature and with one another, with the world around and with the world within.

Before India can lead the world, her children must be first re-awakened to the true spirit and sense of her **being**, her true nature. We, Indians, must rise up to fully grasp and realise the truth about what India is in her soul. Only then will we be able to grasp what forms would a true Indian renaissance take.

India's freedom was seen by Sri Aurobindo in this larger context of the destiny of humanity. He saw India as the living embodiment of the highest spiritual knowledge, and the repository of the sublimest spiritual achievements of the human race. As he wrote in the same editorial for *Vande Mataram*:

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *'The Renaissance in India'* 1997 edition

⁶ McDermott, Rachel Fell (2005). "Bengali religions". In Lindsay Jones (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Religion: 15 Volume Set*. Vol. 2 (2nd ed.). Detroit, Mi: MacMillan Reference USA. pp. 824–832.

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“India must have Swaraj in order to live for the world, not as a slave for the material and political benefit of a single purse-proud and selfish nation, but a free people for the spiritual and intellectual benefit of the human race.”⁷

Education and only spiritual upliftment are the most important means through which we can hope to bring peace and harmony in society.

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5. Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1997

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and other Essays on Indian culture*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication