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Swami Vivekananda and the Buddhism

By

Edmund Weber

Modern Hindus use the term 'Hindu' in a positive sense. It is no more a derogatory appellation used by foreigners and oppressors, but a powerful self chosen name.

The historically most valid ideologue of that positive Hindu understanding is Narendra Nath Datta (1863-1902). This highly talented son of a regarded lawyer family in Calcutta became disciple of Ramakrishna, the flaming son and priest of the goddess Kali and greatest religious virtuoso in the 19th century. Becoming a sannyasin Narendra received the title and name Swami Vivekananda; after the death of his master he set up the famous Ramakrishna Order.¹

This Bengali monk declared concisely: "We are Hindus"² (III 368). The fact that they called themselves 'Hindus' reveals the emergence of a new self conscious Hinduism which doesn't accept the derogatory meaning of the term written by the British oppressors 'Hindoo' anymore: "I do not use the Hindu in any bad sense at all, nor do I agree with those that think there is any bad meaning in it." (III 368) His high esteem of the term Hindu rooted in his very surprising conviction, "that this is the highest word that any language can invent" (III 368). Now the term given by foreigners and misused by oppressors to humiliate the majority of India's people as 'Hindoos' got a new and positive substance: the ancient Hindu tradition. This explains Vivekananda's programmatic statement: "I am one of the proudest men ever found, but let me tell frankly, it is not for myself, but on account of my ancestry" (III 368). Therefore he asked the Hindu people: "Why should you feel ashamed to take the name of Hindu, which is your greatest and most glorious possession?" (III 461)

His historically revolutionary conclusion: "I am proud to call myself a Hindu" (III 381) announces the beginning of a new era. The demoralised 'Hindoos' found in the person of Vivekananda a powerful Guru teaching and motivating them to transform themselves into

¹ Cf. Swami Tejasananda: A Short Life of Swami Vivekananda, Belur Math (Dist. Howrah) 1993

² The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta: Advaita Ashram 1984 seqq. Vol.

self-conscious Hindus. The Hindu name had become full of Shakti, had become a *Nama* once more.

But as mentioned above the Swami doesn't cut off the new Hindu identity from the ancient tradition. There is no westernising in the basic principles of his Hinduism.

The heritage of his ancestors, the most splendid and most glorious possession and treasure, the Swami called 'Hindu character'. Although this Hinduism approves external liberty of the country, - it still doesn't content itself with that aim but goes on to spiritual liberation: "The Hindu says that political and social independence are well and good, but the real thing is spiritual independence - Mukti"(V 458). Nowhere Vivekananda preaches something like secularism. The essence and last aim of the Hindu character or Hindu culture is spiritual. Secularisation or worldliness would mean alienation from the heritage of the ancestors.

But there is another even more revolutionary element of the Hindu character or Hindu culture. Vivekananda doesn't anymore accept the Hindus splitting ideology of the colonial rulers and ideologists, who falsely argued Jainism and Buddhism wouldn't belong to the Hindu fold at all and all the other Hindu sects were more or less separate religions: "Whether you take the Vaidika, the Jaina, or the Bauddha, the Advaita, the Vishishtadvaita, or the Dvaita - there, they are all of one mind"(V 458).

This concept of Hindu unity is the most important historical impact of the Swami's activities which in our days are demonstrating a history making power. No wonder that the idea of Hindu culture is attacked by people wanting to perpetuate the mental alienation of the Hindu masses.

As long as the strategy of splitting the 'Hindoos' was working and these people felt like underdogs in relation to the colonialists the Hindu culture couldn't support the old Western religious traditions oppressed by the materialist and anti-spiritual ideologies.

The success of Vivekananda's Hinduism in the Western world - since his appearance before the Parliament of Religions in Chicago 1893 - originates in its immense supportive effect on the upcoming Western spiritual revolution in the 20th century; and the success will grow stronger in the next century.

The Hindu character or Hindu culture, which all indo-genous religious sects and currents are sharing, has not only a uniting power, but is the essential fundament, the soul of India: "Now you understand clearly where the Soul of this ogress (i.e. India; the author) is - it is in religion"(V 459). Or: "We have seen that our vigour, our strength, nay, our national life is in our religion"(III 289).

This Hindu soul is the real reason that nobody could annihilate the Hindu nation: "Because no one was able to destroy that (i.e. the Hindu religion; the author), therefore the Hindu nation is still living, having survived so many troubles and tribulations"(V 459).

But the Hindu character has needed centuries for its development (V 460)³ and started to become a forceful history making figure in Vivekananda's time. He was absolutely convinced of the Hindu progress: "In the meanwhile in India there is a tremendous revival of religion"(III 172). Nowadays we see the fulfilment of his prophecy.

According to Vivekananda the social ideal of this newly awakened Hinduism can only be Brahmanism. Yet, he doesn't mean Brahmanism by birth but by spiritual qualification - in the sense of other Hindu reform movements and particularly of the Buddha: "I mean the ideal for the Brahminness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present. That is the ideal of the Hindu race"(III 197).

Swami Vivekananda deduces from this concept of Neo-Brahmanism a socio-spiritual reform program in order to enable all people to become Brahmanas again. Again, because all people were Brahmanas in those times, i.e. during the Satya Yuga, the Golden Age, and only as they degenerated, they were divided up into four castes (III 197).

³ According to the Swami evolutionism is the basic term of Indian philosophy and only in his day it has "made its way into physical science of Europe".(V 519)

The caste system is not a divine order but a product of human perversion. Therefore it's by no means an eternal institution. When the world cycle turns round, caste system which has split the Hindu nation will vanish and all the people will become Brahmanas again.

In the eyes of the Swami this revolution is happening now; the caste Society is wearing to an end and the time of a caste rid Society is taking shape: "This cycle is turning round now, and I draw your attention to this fact"(III 198).

The eschatological aspect of Vivekananda's vision of history explains best his amazing real historical commitment, his missionary eagerness and his incredible Hindu optimism - at a time, when colonialism stood in full blossom and reinforced India's caste system. However, the Swami's social reform didn't take its rise from European bourgeois ideas but originated from traditional Indian social utopias which were already formulated as the west didn't even exist. The educational Brahmanisation of the society seems the best overcoming of the disassociating caste Society to him. The final aim of that Neo-Brahmanical social revolution, the equalizing of entire mankind on highest cultural level; spoken traditionally: the mankind will become only one, i.e. Brahminical caste: "Such is our ideal of caste, as meant for raising all humanity slowly and gently towards the realization of that great ideal of the spiritual one, who is non-resisting, calm, steady, worshipful, pure, and meditative"(III 198).

This Neo-Brahmanism therefore, has nothing more to do with the degenerative era of the Kali-Yuga when orthodoxy connected Brahminhood with birth; rather, it is the experiment delivering to all castes the spiritual and moral qualities which have been ascribed only to the Brahmanas in the past.

In this regard Neo-Brahmanism is an integral component of the modern middle class Hinduism, which didn't and doesn't want ideologically to associate spiritual and moral chances of the Hindu high culture with birth, state and caste further on.

But the most important historical and moral aspect of Vivekananda's and of all modernist Hindus' social ideology is their fundamental anti-caste mentality. The modern Hinduism will never tell the people to remain in their caste they are born in; they will tell them to give up the caste mentality and behaviour in order to uplift themselves to the highest cultural level: the Satya Yuga Brahmanism.

But exactly that Hindu liberation program has been neglected till today by the ruling class of independent India. There has always been an impressing propaganda of unity, equality and uplifting the Indian people, but in reality an actual cementing of the splitting and degenerative caste system was going on.⁴

The world wide anti-Hindu combine knows the value of perpetuating the caste system: it weakens the Hindu culture; therefore it is quite logical that they are supporting the political ruling class of India and fighting the modernist Hindu movement.

Vivekananda has clearly seen the interdependence of the development of Hindu Society by unity and the personal development by Neo-Brahmanisation.

Combining the term Hindu with the idea of Hindu unity he rejects not only the splitting caste system but also the withdrawal into single religious sects, a way taken by many of his contemporaries engaged in the reform movement: "The band of reformers in our country want, ..., to build up a separate sect of their own. They have, however, done good work; may the blessings of God be showered on their heads! But why should you, Hindus, want to separate yourselves from the great common fold?"(III 460-461)

Segregation and withdrawal have been the basic evils of the Hindoo history. Both diseases produced and produce till now the well-known Indian servility. But Vivekananda's concept of

⁴ In contradiction to the very effective propaganda of the ruling political class and their ideological supporters, particularly the English newspapers, new empirical researches demonstrate very clearly that after 50 years of independence India is still a caste Society. Till now the basic position of an (semi-)individual is determined by his caste. The real subjects of the Indian Society are the 4635 castes (cf. *The People of India*, ed. by K. S. Singh - Anthropological Survey of India, Delhi etc. Vol. XI: An Anthropological Atlas, 1993, p. 5).

'Hindu' demonstrates a radical break with that servile 'Hindoo' mentality. It shows the revival of the traditional values, the Dharma, motivating and pledging the Hindus to take care of the common affairs of Hindu nation. Therefore it's obvious: the escapism of the segregating sects contradicts true Hinduism.

This Hinduism "has certain common grounds, common to all our sects, however varying their conclusions may be, however different their claims may be"(III 287).

Vivekananda doesn't condemn the sects. He accepts them if they reintegrate into the Hindu fold. As relative particles of the Hindu culture they get their value. But it is the task of Hinduism as such "to bring out theses life-giving common principles of our religion."(III 287)

The Hindu conception serves as an ideological organisation which realises the common characteristics of all indo-genous religions and sects. This development releases the energies to build up the new caste free Neo-Brahmanical Society.

In order to reform the Hindu Society Vivekananda gave his special attention to Buddhism and its relationship to the Hinduism.

In many secondary remarks Vivekananda expressed his view of Buddhism. He blamed the Buddhists, the Bauddhas, because they were preaching: "Nothing is more desirable in life than moksha; whoever you are, come one and all to take it"(V 447).

He considered such an escapism as irresponsible because the "Svadharmas" i.e. the worldly tasks, which everybody has to fulfil in his life, were not respected as necessary duties which nobody were allowed to escape. Vivekananda asks the Bauddhas: "Is that ever possible?"(V 447) - i.e. to follow the moksha path disregarding the respective worldly duties? And he let the Hindu scriptures answer: "You are a householder, you must concern yourself much with things of that sort; you do your Svadharmas (natural duty)"(V 447-448).

But these natural duties don't refer to *worldliness*, i.e. egoistic enjoyment of worldly goods, but to selfless realisation of the Dharma.

Vivekananda sets an example: "Non-injury (i.e. Ahimsa; the author) is right; 'Resist no evil' is a great thing - these are indeed grand principles"(V 448). But if someone - he may be a Brahmana or of whatever caste - commits a crime, according to the Dharma he has to be hurt or even to be killed as a criminal (V 448), in order to guarantee justice and order in the world. Everybody has "to try do good to others as much as you can"(V 448)

Nevertheless Vivekananda doesn't forget the other side of the Dharmic coin: "But passively to submit to wrong done by others is a sin - with the householder. He must try to pay back in their own coin then and there"(V 448).

Quoting the Hindu Shastras he strictly argues against the escapism of the Buddhist Moksha agitation, which pretends the possibility of ignoring the Dharma: "No doubt, Moksha is far superior to Dharma; but Dharma should be finished first of all"(V 448).

Only if people including monks like him have fulfilled all their natural duties, their Svadharms, *have worked out their karmic force*, they are allowed to take care of their personal Moksha: As long as "the force" of an individual which "has been stored up as the resultant of our previous works," ... "has not worked itself out, who can possibly remain quiet and give up work?"(V 449-450)

But if the Buddhist monk can't do that, Vivekananda asks him: "How do you profess to be a man? You are not householder even - what to talk of Moksha for you!!"(V 449)

Vivekananda was obviously afraid of the Buddhist monks because they were making Dharma and Moksha alternative lifestyles, in such a way diverting the people from their mundane duties and we can say in this way initiating 'Hindoo' escapism.

But in contradiction to Hindu orthodoxy he upheld the convergence of Buddhism and Vedic religion: "The aims of the Buddhistic and the Vedic religions are the same," but he criticised the ways the Buddhists were going: "the means adopted by the Buddhistic are not right"(V 455)

However, Swami Vivekananda doesn't blame the Buddha himself but only his followers of this faultiness. Buddha and his true Buddhism, which by no means contradict Vedic tradition, remain an integral part of Hinduism, more than that.

In his famous speech before the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on the 26th September 1893 Vivekananda confessed as a Hindu to Buddha and Buddhism: "I am not a Buddhist, as you have heard, and yet I am. If China, or Japan, or Ceylon follow the teachings of the Great master, India worships him as God incarnate on earth"(I 21). And if he, Vivekananda, announced to blame the Buddhists then far be it from him, "to criticise him whom I worship as God incarnate on earth"(I 21).

This theological understanding of Buddha is not an individual opinion of Vivekananda; the Hindu tradition considers Shakyamuni as an Avatar of Vishnu. Buddha is a powerful incarnation of God and therefore he has to be worshipped [5].⁵

At the threshold to the 20th Century the Bengali Swami confessed to the ancient Hindu Buddhism. And this Buddha devotion of the Hindus doesn't allow to maintain the historical assumption, the whole Buddhism has been extinguished in Hindu India sometime; it existed and lives on in its Avatarian figure. Only the monastic Buddhism vanished having based on royal patronage, feudal properties and a clergy preaching the flight from the world.

Vivekananda then explains to his American listeners his view of the relationship of Hinduism and Buddhism remembering the relation of those two religions, they know very well: "The relation between Hinduism (by Hinduism, I mean the religion of the Vedas) and what is called Buddhism, at the present day is nearly the same as between Judaism and Christianity"(I 21). He continues comparing the founders of Christianity and Buddhism referring to their ethnic and religious affiliation: As Jesus Christ was a Jew so Shakyamuni was a Hindu (I 21). The two great religious personalities themselves didn't leave their original religions. However, there is a big difference between both religions: While the Jews refused their ethno-religious comrade Jesus Christ, in the contrast the Hindus recognised the Shakyamuni as God - and would keep him up to revere till now (I 21).

In this respect there is no contradiction, no difference between the Hindus and Buddha. But there is a genuine contradiction between the lessons of Buddha and Buddhists. Unlike his successors who seemed to have separated themselves from Hinduism, Buddha didn't preach anything against Hindu religion. Even more: "He (Shakyamuni) therefore, like Jesus, came to fulfil and not to destroy"(I 21).

This surprising determination of the relation of Hinduism and Buddha, which may echo the Christian interpretation of the relation of the Old Testament religion and Jesus Christ, Vivekananda formulates with unheard unambiguity some lines later: "Again, I repeat, Shakyamuni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus"(I 21).

No doubt, this Hindu concept of the fulfilment of Hindu religion by Buddha's doctrine, is the most radical Hindu-Buddhist identity model, that exists in Hinduism. But it isn't an inter-religious model of compromise - perhaps to convert Buddhists to Hinduism. The Buddha Vivekananda speaks of is the Buddha of a modern Hindu, whose later main representative has been Mahatma Gandhi and not the Neo-Buddhist convert Ambedkar.

The Swami doesn't doubt that the modern Buddhists didn't understand the true Buddha and his lessons "... in the case of Buddha, it was his followers who did not realise the import of his teachings"(I 21). Somewhere else he says: "As the Jew did not understand the fulfilment of the Old Testament, so the Buddhists did not understand the fulfilment of the truth of the Hindu religion"(I 21).

⁵ A nice example is the worship of the Buddha Murti on top of the Dhauili Hill near Bhubaneswar (Orissa), which was built by Japanese Buddhists in order to honour the edicts of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka. This Buddhist stupa attracts thousands of Hindus every day. For them the Buddha is the Great Master and a God incarnate. Therefore they worship him touching his body with their oily hands and putting flowers down to his feet.

The fall of old Buddhism in India he finally traces back to the fact that it despised the Vedas and deprived India of the belief in God (I 22). At the same time, however, this fall deprived the Brahmanas of that wonderful sympathy and charity, that wonderful leaven, which the Buddhism brought to the masses and that made the Indian Society so famous, that old Greek writers reported, no Hindu is known as a liar and no Hindu woman to be indecent (I 23).

Swami Vivekananda attributes to the lessons Buddhas an elementary value for the Hindu Society: they are a necessary part of the Hindu Dharma, they are a socio-ethical engine required by the philosophical strength of the Brahmins: "Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism. Then realise what the separation has shown to us, that the Buddhists cannot stand without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmins without the hearts of the Buddhist"(I 23).

The split of Buddhism and Hinduism brought India the worst disaster: "This separation between the Buddhists and the Brahmins is the cause of the downfall of India"(I 23).

These big mistakes of the Buddhists, spilling the lessons and the work of Buddha by their anti-Vedic attitude and contempt of God they withdrew the elixir from the Indian Society, and that's the reason, "why India is populated by three hundred millions of beggars"(I 23), that India's economy is ruined and there are no chances to make a livelihood. But not only this economical disaster is based on self destruction of the separatist Buddhism but also that "India has been the slave of conquerors for the read for thousand years"(I 23).

However one evaluates these historical assumptions: they demonstrate that Vivekananda, the father of modern Hinduism, sees the Buddhism, the Baudhadharma, as a fulfilment of Hinduism. But nevertheless he insists that the frame and basis of this Hindu Buddhism are the Hindu nation or culture. And Buddhism and Brahmanism are necessary complements of that Hindu culture. Correspondingly the Swami concludes his address with the pathetic exclamation: "Let us then join the wonderful intellect of the Brahmins with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanising power of the Great Master"(I 23), i.e. Buddhas.

Vivekananda's concept of reintegration of both religious traditions is reinforced in our days. It is no utopia anymore but a realistic program for the next century.

But the universal approach of eschatological concept of Vivekananda transcends Buddhism and Hinduism, it includes all religious people. The Swami's vision of a free alliance of all religiously developed individuals, whatever macro-culture they may belong to, the global Brahmanisation, is the irenic counter-conception to the aggressive ideology of religious war called clash of civilisations and to all the other agitation of splitting the religious people. An International of religious people of the world is the logical consequence of Vivekananda's conception of religion, an International protecting the substance of mankind: religion. The *inter*-religious war today is nothing else than the everlasting *anti*-religious attack on that substance in order to subdue the individuals under the reign of worldliness, an ever possible relapse into subhuman conditions.