Vivekananda and Gandhi views: A review of similarity on their impact to society

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Abstract

One was a Hindu monk who looked like a prince, whereas the other—a British educated barrister turned politician—looked like “a half-naked fakir,” as Churchill described him deridingly. The monk in the princely garb was none other than Swami Vivekananda, who mesmerized Eastern and Western audiences not only by his magnificent looks and magnetic personality, but also by the forceful delivery of his universal message of Vedanta in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The half-clad man in the loin-cloth, despite his lowly peasant garb and poor physique, came to be revered around the world as Mahatma Gandhi—the saintly politician who set India free from the imperialist British rule by launching his most powerful weapon of nonviolent resistance, called, Satyagraha (satya: truth, agraha: insistence). Swami and Gandhi considered religion to be the prime essence, the very lifeblood of the nation as well of all life—the aim of which was to realize God as Truth. They identified themselves with the poorest people of the society and served them as Daridra Narayana — "God in the form of poor and downtrodden people". Gandhiji’s humanism, like Swamiji’s, is an
emanation from his faith in man’s potentialities and the belief that man has to strive forward to realize his potential.

This paper is going to examine the similarity between Vivekananda’s and Gandhi’s individual responses to nationwide demoralization and social-religious degradation and also examine their regional/cultural milieu which also contributed to the shaping of each one’s specific response.

Man consists of two factors, the mind and the body. Mind with its consciousness is said to be directly opposed to, though somehow or other intimately connected with, the body with its extension; for, the mind has no extension; and the body, consciousness. Now, the consciousness of mind assumes the form of reason in man, while consciousness is the common property of all living beings. Hence is the celebrated, yet much condemned, definition of man, man is a rational animal. In this way, man has two sides – a higher rational side; a lower animal one. A perfect man is he who can work out a perfect synthesis between these two sides of his nature with, of course, the higher controlling the lower, as natural and beneficial. A perfect society also, therefore, is one in which there is such a perfect synthesis between spiritualism and materialism, with, of course, the former controlling the latter, as inevitable and essential. Society is, of course, a divine institution. Still, from the practical point of view, its inner divinity, real nature, has to be manifested. And, then this great fact has to be kept in mind, viz. that it has to manifest, and not manufacture Truth. As a matter of fact, Truth, real Truth cannot be manufactured at all at will; it can be only manifested through wisdom and good sense. Vivekananda’s concept of society, though derived from Vedantik philosophy, seeks to integrate both the spiritualistic and materialistic interpretations of both man and society; it is both individualistic and socialistic. Believing in
the divine nature of man, Vivekananda seeks to establish a continuum between society, culture and civilization, like the wick, oil and the flame. This approximates the integral view of both man and society. There is no anti-thesis between the two. Vivekananda says, "Two attempts have been made in the world to found social life. The one was upon religion or spirituality or transcendentalism, and the other was upon social necessity or materialism or realism. The one looks beyond the horizon of the little material world.. While the other is content to stand on things of the world and expects to find a firm footing there.” 1 Referring to Western and Eastern society he observed, "The West is groaning under the tyranny of the Shylocks, and the East is groaning under the tyranny of the priests, each must keep the other in check. Do not think that one alone is to help the world."2 Thus, it is clear that Vivekananda admits the necessity of both -- Spiritualism and Materialism, Idealism and Realism. Both are complementary to each other. Vivekananda is quite familiar with the West's materialistic approach to life. So he warns the West to make spirituality the basis of her life. He writes, "The whole Western civilization will crumble to pieces in the next fifty years, if there is no spiritual foundation.”3 In Vivekananda’s view, “The Western man is born individualistic, while the Hindu is socialistic – entirely socialistic.”4 In marriage, and many other affairs in the West, each individual can assert that he or she will abide by personal predilection and not be directed to by others. The Hindu demands that the individual shall bow down to the needs of society, and that those needs shall regulate his personal behavior. As a result of these two attitudes, the West has granted freedom to society, so that society has grown and become dynamic, whereas the Hindu society has become cramped in every way. Pointing out this distinction he says, "In India, religion was never shackled ...On the other hand, a fixed point was necessary to allow this infinite variation to religion, and society was
chosen as that point in India. As a result, society became rigid and almost immovable....On the other hand, in the West, the field of variation was society, and the constant point was religion.... The result is a splendid social organization with a religion that never rose beyond the grossest materialistic conceptions."5 Life differs in the East and the West, because the goals are different. He asseverates, "Of the West, the goal is individual independence, the language money-making education, the means politics; of India, the goal is Mukti, the language the Veda, the means renunciation.”6 The contrast is complete, both as regards the ideal and the means of its realization. In India, the emphasis on spirituality, reinforced by renunciation, has produced a type of culture that is different from that in the West. The West goes on multiplying its wants, while the East tries to remain satisfied with what little it can get. In the West, happiness and laughter are on the surface; but inside it is all sorrow. The East is sombre outside, but full of contentment inside. In the West, the need for satisfying wants gives rise to material prosperity; in the East, renunciation leads to poverty. He noted that the Indian reformers of his days, dazzled by the glamour of Western civilization failed to distinguish between the two outlooks on life, and, consequently, they believed that India's salvation lay in a blind imitation of everything Western. In his book `East and West', he further pointed out that, in addition to the basic outlooks, one had to take into account the climatic, historical, and other influences, which mould a nation's character. Dress, food, architecture, personal behavior, etc., are largely the products of geographical conditions. Besides, to understand a society, one must have personal experience of its inner working; superficial studies are greatly misleading. Hence Vivekananda writes: There is such a wide divergence between Western society and the Indian as regards the primal course and goal of each that any sect in India, framed after the Western model, will miss the aim.7 He observed, “The spell of imitating the West was
getting such a strong hold upon India that what is good or what is bad was no longer decided by reason, judgment, discrimination, or reference to the Sastras.\(^8\) While making a choice between the imitative, soft-brained, orthodox bigot, he preferred the latter, "There are two obstacles in our path in India-the Scylla of old orthodoxy and the Chairladies of modern European civilization. Of these two, I vote for the old orthodoxy, and not for the Europeanized system; for the old orthodox man may be ignorant, he may be crude, but he is a man, he has a faith, he has strength, he stands on his own feet, while the Europeanized man has no backbone."\(^9\) Vivekanand further points out, "In spite of the sparkle and glitter of Western civilization... I tell them to their face, that it is all vain."\(^10\) The civilization of the West is derived from the Greeks, whose watchword was expression, as against the Indian keynote of meditativeness. Hence Western art excels in perfection of form, whereas Indian art tells of deep thoughts. Europe is engrossed so much in action and expression that it has hardly any time for meditation, while India thinks so deeply that she hardly knows how to express or act. The extrovert West tends to keep itself confined to matter, whereas the introvert east is liable to get lost in the non-material. The conceptions of God, religion, and other things also conform to this external tendency in the West. He solemnly asserts, "Politics, social improvement, in one word, this world, is the goal of mankind in the West, and God and religion come in quietly as helpers to attain the goal. Their God is, so to speak, the Being who helps to cleanse and to furnish this world for them."\(^11\) All this may be described as a tribal or materialistic conception of God. The West is reconciled to God when things go well, but angry when suffering is the lot. Vivekananda thus pointed out that all the great religious systems originated in the East. Indian society survived a hundred shocks similar to those under which the old civilizations of Greece, Rome, Babylon, and Egypt crumbled down. That shows the
intrinsic vitality of Indian culture and its power of recuperating after every fall. The fact is that the West has yet to learn the secrets of a stable society from India.