Nationalism in Reference to Vivekananda and Gandhi

Dr. Arvind Kumar (PDF), Deptt. of Economics, Ch. Charan Singh University, Meerut.

Abstract

Swami Vivekananda’s nationalism is associated with spiritualism. He linked India’s regeneration to her age-old tradition of spiritual goal. He said, “Each nation has a destiny to fulfill, each nation has a message to deliver, each nation has a mission to accomplish. Therefore we must have to understand the mission of our own race, the destiny it has to fulfill, the place it has to occupy in the march of nations, and the role which it has to contribute to the harmony of races”. His nationalism is based on Humanism and Universalism, the two cardinal features of Indian spiritual culture. He taught people to get rid first of self inflicted bondages and resultant miseries. The nature of his nationalism is not materialistic but purely spiritual, which is considered to be the source of all strength of Indian life. Unlike western nationalism which is secular in nature, Swami Vivekananda’s nationalism is based on religion which is life blood of the Indian people. Deep concern for masses, freedom and equality through which one expresses self, spiritual integration of the world on the basis of universal brotherhood and “Karmyoga” a system of ethics to attain freedom both political and spiritual through selfless service make the basis of his nationalism. Gandhi more or less completely bypassed the dominant nationalist vocabulary and showed that it was possible to articulate and defend the case for independence in a very different language. He showed that not every movement for
independence is national, not every national struggle is nationalist and that not every nationalist movement need articulate itself in the language of European rather than home-grown theories of nationalism.

**Keywords:** nationalism, humanism, universalism, harmony, freedom.

**Introduction:**

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Dutta (Noren) in Calcutta on January 12, 1863, in an aristocratic and highly educated Bengali Kayastha family. Three generations of the Duttas had been lawyers and so also was Noren’s father Vishwanath Dutta, an attorney of Calcutta High Court, who was known for his liberal religious and social outlook. Noren’s mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, being deeply pious, practiced austerities, prayed often, and read and recited passages from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other sacred texts of Hinduism. In the book, “Swami Vivekananda on Himself”, Vivekananda says, “my father and mother fasted and prayed, for years and years, so that I would be born.” As a young boy, Noren’s biggest ambition was to become “a wandering monk” when he grew up.

Six years younger than Vivekananda, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in a Gujarati Vaishnava family on October 2nd in 1869 in the small seacoast city of Porbandar in the Kathiawar peninsula in western India. Three generations of the Gandhis had served the local Indian princes as their Diwans (prime ministers) under the British Raj; and so also was Mohandas’ father Karamchand Gandhi, a Diwan, of both Porbandar and Rajkot states successively. The child Gandhi grew up listening to stories of the extraordinary bravery and fiercely independent spirit of his grandfather, Uttamchand Gandhi, known in the family as Ota Bapa. His father Karamchand Gandhi (Kaba for short) had earned a
reputation as a man of incorruptibility, impartiality, and practical political acumen. “He had no education save that of experience;” however, “his rich experience of practical affairs stood him in good stead in the solution of the most intricate questions and in managing hundreds of men,” wrote his son Mohandas Gandhi in his Autobiography. With no religious training, Kaba Gandhi was the kind of Hindu who frequently visited temples, listened to religious discourses (katha-varta), and joined in prayer chanting and group singing (bhajan-kirtan).

1. Swami Vivekananda


A major element of Vivekananda's message was nationalist. He saw his effort very much in terms of a revitalisation of the Hindu nation, which carried Hindu spirituality and which could counter Western materialism.
The notions of White supremacy and Western superiority, strongly believed by the colonizers, were to be questioned based on Hindu spirituality. This kind of spiritual Hinduism was later carried forward by Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. It also became a main inspiration for the current brand of Hindu nationalism today. One of the most revered leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Babasaheb Apte's lifelong pet sentence was "Vivekananda is like Gita for the RSS." Historians have observed that this helped the nascent Independence movement with a distinct national identity and kept it from being the simple derivative function of European nationalisms.

Gandhi and Rama Rajya:

Though Mahatma Gandhi never called himself a "Hindu nationalist"; he believed in and propagated concepts like Dharma and "Rama Rajya" (Rule of Lord Rama) as part of his social and political philosophy. Gandhi said “By political independence I do not mean an imitation to the British House of commons, or the soviet rule of Russia or the Fascist rule of Italy or the Nazi rule of Germany. They have systems suited to their genius. We must have ours suited to ours. What that can be is more than I can tell. I have described it as Rama Rajya i.e., sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority." He emphasized that "Rama Rajya" to him meant peace and justice. “Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Rama Rajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure.” He also emphasized that it meant respect for all religions: “My Hinduism teaches me to respect all religions. In this lies the secret of Rama Rajya.”

Followers of Vivekananda:
Swami Vivekananda, the nineteenth-century Indian Hindu monk is considered as one of the most influential people of modern India. Some examples are as follows:

Rabindranath Tagore suggested to study Vivekananda's works to learn about India.

Indian independence activist, Subhas Chandra Bose regarded Vivekananda as his spiritual teacher.

Barack Obama, the President of the United States quoted Vivekananda's words in his speech delivered in India in November 2010.

Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu said that Vivekananda inspired her to enter politics.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that Vivekananda writings encouraged her in the difficult phases of her political career.

On 6 February 1921, Mahatma Gandhi came to Belur Math and paid homage to Vivekananda. On this occasion he said, “I have come here to pay my homage and respect to the revered memory of Swami Vivekananda, whose birthday is being celebrated today. I have gone through his works very thoroughly, and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country become a thousand-fold. I ask you, young men, not to go away empty-handed without imbibing something of the spirit of the place where Swami Vivekananda lived and died.

Pranab Mukherjee, the President of India, suggested in a speech delivered on 31 May 2013 at the Convocation Hall, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, to remember the call of Vivekananda to reconstruct India's national character.
Narendra Modi, the Prime minister of India, is an ardent admirer of Vivekananda. In April 2013, he visited Belur Math and meditated at the room of Vivekananda.

In 2013, Yoga guru Ramdev told he feels Vivekananda spread "India's cultural message" to the world.

Social activist Anna Hazare was motivated by the works of Swami Vivekananda and took inspiration for all the social work he did from Swami Vivekananda only.

Arvind Kejriwal read about Swami Vivekananda during his IIT days and was very much inspired from him.

Kangana Ranaut considers swami Vivekananda as her spiritual guru and is an ardent follower of his teachings.

Vivekananda's birthday, on 12 January is celebrated as the National Youth Day in India. In 2012, a three-day world conference was organized by the Institute of World Religions to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda to mark the days Vivekananda delivered his historic lectures in 1893. In 2013, Indian railways started Vivek Express, four pairs of express trains as a tribute to Vivekananda on his 150th birth anniversary.

Views of Gandhiji on Nationalism:

The period between 1919 to independence is marked by three important struggles - Non-cooperation movement of 1919, Civil Disobedience movement of 1930, with its call of complete independence and the famous Quit Indian Movement of 1942. It is in this background we must try to understand Gandhi and his role in terms of Indian nationalism.
Therefore Gandhi, his technique of struggle, his concept of national identity was radically different as Professor Bhikhu Parekh has commented, “He more or less completely bypassed the dominant nationalist vocabulary and showed that it was possible to articulate and defend the case for independence in a very different language. He showed that not every movement for independence is national, not every national struggle is nationalist and that not every nationalist movement need articulate itself in the language of European rather than home-grown theories of nationalism”. (Source: Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, p. 3)

Many of the other leaders who came before Gandhi were western trained lawyers or intellectuals and saw many positives to the Western British way of life and were demanding from the British the same liberal system and parliamentary democracy on the basis of self-determination that the British had in their own homeland and also hoped to stop the economic exploitation of colonial rule. But Gandhi focussed on the way of life of the Indian village and its thousands of year old substantially self-contained and self-sufficient system to argue for a different kind of national life where that way of life would be valued and protected and its strengths fully taken advantage of in the interest of the nation. He also argued the basic purpose of life in the Indian national understanding was spiritual growth (or attaining moksha) and one of the best facilitators of this moral cultivation was the simple and sustainable way of life of the Indian village.

Prof. Bhikhu Parekh has commented, “For Gandhi British imperialism dominated India at three related but different levels. At the political level the arrogant colonial government oppressed the Indian people and denied their right to run their affairs themselves. At the economic level it exploited and impoverished them, destroyed their indigenous industries
and subordinated their interests to those of the British economy”. In Gandhi’s view this was far more disturbing than political oppression and could continue even if India became independent. At the most disturbing moral and cultural level, British imperialism destroyed the identity and integrity of Indian civilization and turned the Indians into brown Englishmen. Gandhi was convinced that the rule of British civilization could continue even if the British government were to stop ruling over India and British capital to cease exploiting it. British imperialism was unacceptable not only because of its political and even economic but moral and cultural consequences. The struggle against it had therefore to be mounted and independence obtained at all three levels, especially the last. At the cultural level the anti-imperialist struggle had to be fought on two fronts simultaneously. First, British civilization, which so infatuated and blinded the Indians to the moral enormity of foreign rule and legitimized their economic and political domination must be subjected to a thorough-going critique. Second, the basic structure of Indian civilization, which they largely saw through the biased British perspective, must be sensitively teased out and defended.

In interpreting British imperialism in this way, Gandhi integrated and went beyond the three different types of critique advanced by his predecessors. Broadly speaking Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Gokhale and the so-called liberals had welcomed the political and cultural advantages of British rule but attacked it on the grounds that it had drained India’s wealth, ruined its industries, imposed unfair trading arrangements and subordinated its economic development to British colonial interests. Although mindful of its economic and cultural consequences, the leaders of the terrorist movements in Bengal and Maharashtra attacked it on political grounds and were the first to develop a distinctive theory of political as distinct from cultural nationalism. They argued that the Indians have as much right to run their
affairs as the British had to run theirs, that colonialism was a form of slavery and outrage to Indian dignity and self-respect, and that the ‘honor’ of ‘mother India’ demanded that she should be freed of the ‘foreign yoke’. In a culture which conceptualizes energy in feminine terms and associates activity and restlessness with woman and passivity and detachment with ma, it was not at all surprising that the votaries of violence should have idealized ‘mother’ India and drawn inspiration from the Goddess Kali. Finally Vivekananda, B.C. Pal, Tilak and the so-called conservative leaders concentrated on the need to preserve the integrity of traditional ways of life and thought. They introduced the concept of Indian civilization to match the one championed by the British, sharply distinguished the two and attacked foreign rule not so much because it involved economic exploitation and violated Indian pride as because it imposed an alien materialist civilization on India’s essentially spiritual one.

In fact Gandhi saw India as a battleground between the immoral western civilization of which the British were an excellent example (and which he was convinced would ultimately not least because it was based on immoral values like greed which led to violence) and the sustainable moral civilization of India where the focus was on helping each soul find his spiritual salvation or God. In fact even in his own life that was his priority.

He wrote once, “I count no sacrifice too great for the sake of seeing God face to face. The whole of my activity, whether it may be called social, political, humanitarian or ethical, is directed to that end. And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence, my passions for the service of
the suppressed classes and as I cannot render this service without entering politics, I find myself in them”. (Source: Young India, 1924)

His chosen way of reaching God was thus service of the poor and the oppressed but in a non-violent manner because violence would be sinful, non-spiritual, and non-religious. Thus he could not agree with Communists for instance who suggested that the rich and powerful will not give their relationship of dominance and exploitation of the poor and the weak without coercion or force because it was not to their advantage. But Gandhi’s approach was to strive for a change of heart and shun violence strictly and under all provocations and circumstances.

He once told the wife of his British surgeon in 1924: ‘My own motive is to put forth all my energy in an attempt to save Indian, that is, ancient culture, from impending destruction by modern, that is, Western culture being imposed upon India. The essence of ancient culture is based upon the practice of the utmost non-violence. Its motto is the good of all including every living thing, whereas Western culture is frankly based upon violence.’ (Source: Gandhi to Mrs. Maddock, Collected Works of MK Gandhi, Vol. 23, p. 243)

While Gandhi was critical of the modern western civilization and saw it as a danger he was not a nationalist in the narrow extreme sense, which hated other countries and wanted domination over them to spread his own version of what is superior civilization. He was open to eventually spreading the message of his understanding of what should be a superior and sustainable civilization to the whole world eventually but only after first establishing it well in the country of its origin. In fact he was not averse to using the term Ram Raj even to refer to the India of his dreams even though the term is obviously open to communally sensitive interpretations.
References:

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