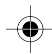

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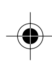

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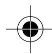

Vivekananda: The ethics of responsibility and the imagining of Modern India*

Gangeya Mukherji**

Vivekananda, along with being an adored religious leader, was also a major thinker activist to engage with the issue of social community in modern India. His ideas regarding certain related concepts can be understood as distinctive in so far as they substantively aspired to inculcate and promote the spirit of tolerance and the value of ethical responsibility, and were thereby ultimately directed at the concretising of the ideals of a decent and just society. He represents as if the cusp of the Indian imagining of modern India, signifying the trajectory of the 19th century ideas of identity and reform into the 20th century wherewith the debate on such ideas acquires a different sharpness. Even if there may be no explicit relation in his thought with the ideas of responsibility and community, this interrelatedness constitutes a thematic unity in his statements and writings, and this linkage is also manifested in his assessment of the possibility of the emergence, in its historical context, of a liberated, and liberal, modern Indian nation. A universalistic concern for people was an essential component of his lifelong exploration of his idea of India. The anchor of his ideas did not encumber its larger non-chauvinistic, non-denominational character, and he shared with many other prominent thinkers of his times the faith that a convergence of cultures and religions and not any single mode of thought formed modern India.

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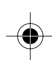
The genealogy of his ideas can be traced in his historical situation as well as in his philosophical inheritance: awareness both of nationalistic passions, and of the institutional and structural injustices that were also implicated in the otherwise impressive cultural heritage of the country; the colonial experience of the illiberality of government; transactions with Western social thought; appreciation of the knowledge revolution in Europe; perception of the resilience of Indian philosophical traditions and knowledge systems, and a sense of human dignity that was based in traditional Indian conceptions; and extensive experience of the West. In the visualising of a future India, his focus is predominantly on the individual as a constituent of larger communities, and on the making of the ethical individual, which in the Indian context involves also the defining of a modern Indian identity that is not limited by traditional conceptual constraints, although it is fully conversant and identifiable with rejuvenated Indian thought.

It is somewhat a common perception that Vivekananda's appearance on the Indian socio-religious scene represented the high noon of Hindu revival. However, his life illustrates more than one dimension of the spiritual consciousness, and as Tapan Raychaudhuri has clearly stated, Vivekananda 'was more than anything else a mystic in the quest of the ultimate reality within a specific Indian tradition' (2006, p. 230). But this primarily experiential aspect of his thinking is not quite accessible as such experiences are unavailable on a cognitive plane for most of us, or even the possibility of metaphysics might, by some, be plainly rejected, in Hume's words, as being 'nothing but sophistry and illusion'. Moreover, Vivekananda was extremely reticent regarding his mystical experiences. Biographers of spiritual personalities have occasionally recorded that the aspect of the mystic remains, for all practical purposes, generally inscrutable.[1] Vivekananda may generally

[1] Peter Heehs discusses in his biography of Aurobindo the difficulties of a biographer in making a study of the 'spiritual life' of a subject. Heehs states: 'It is one thing to scrutinize descriptions of spiritual experiences, quite another to interpret them. Unlike such disciplines as history and literary criticism, the study of spirituality has no generally accepted hermeneutic framework. Spiritual experiences are not available on demand, nor do they lend themselves well to intellectual systematizing.' For details see, Heehs 2003, pp. 85–87.



be better understood as a reconciler and social reformer, in his imagining of India as a people and a common culture, and in his intense idealism regarding the rightful destiny of individuals and communities, and the ethical choices that confront communities in the realising of their imagined essential destiny. It is perhaps relevant at this juncture to refer briefly to Isaiah Berlin's remark on social idealism: 'Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based. These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do, are objects of moral enquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and, indeed, mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is but ethics applied to society' (1990, pp. 1–2).

Sanyas and the Ethics of Responsibility

It is almost needless to mention that Vivekananda was one of the prominent sources of reformist thought in India in the early 20th century, and one who considered the ethics of social responsibility to be the first principle in the imagining of a modern Indian community or nation. Born, as is well known, to a family of catholic sensibilities and taste—his grandfather and father were affluent, cultured lawyers; his father particularly, was a connoisseur of classical music and polyglot with a facility for Persian and Urdu—Vivekananda was driven to metaphysics in the early stages of his life. The act of his renunciation, or *sanyas*, freeing him ritually from caste conventions and particularly from the established norms regulating commensality, was the outcome of religious yearning, but at the same time did not entail the abdication of social responsibility. On the contrary, Vivekananda considered *sanyas* as an appropriate condition to serve equally the individual and the social conscience. It is worth mentioning in this connection that on one plane the social consciousness is contained in the religious consciousness, which also seeks to eliminate social mores that impede the realization of bliss in the lives also of the deprived and disprivileged, and the concept of *seva* (service) thus assumes supreme importance. However the religious consciousness per se realises the limitations of regarding mere social uplift as a source of bliss, and therefore it is not itself

limited by what is generally termed as the purely social consciousness. In this connection, and without thereby forcing an analogy, it may be worthwhile, in understanding the history of the tradition of *sanyas*, to take note of Govind Chandra Pande's discussion of both the early practice of *sanyas*/mendicancy and the varied perceptions in India regarding renunciation both as a conformance with, and deviancy from, the concept of the four *ashrams* of living. 'When towards the close of the later Vedic period Brahmanic values had undergone a great change and some sections at least within the Vedic circle were willing to consider seriously that apparently pessimistic world picture which the doctrine of Samsara entails, more friendly and more fruitful communion with these Munis and Sramanas appears to have taken place' (1995, p. 326). The vitality as well as the general disruptiveness of Indian society by the 6th century B C articulated a spiritual quest and a disillusionment in turn leading to a flowering of an earlier ascetic tradition. The nature of this flowering was however not unmixed and unrelated to social reality. 'In practice, the ranks of the mendicants are filled not merely by ardent religious souls but in the main by those whom despair and material life has driven into beggary' (Ibid., pp. 327–28). This indicates the complicacy of the social dimension of *sanyas*. The core of the 'vows of renunciation' across the different sects typifies the ascetic endeavour in India. It is noteworthy that even with their absolute indifference to worldly possessions in their own individual lives the renunciants were generally not hostile to the institution of property, although thereby not necessarily ignorant of the social costs of the different social institutions. 'They sought to transcend, not disrupt social life. Indeed, having abandoned secular society, they themselves entered a new society based on spiritual relations' (Ibid., p. 332). Pande has further detailed the development of the social dimensions of *sanyas* in his study of the life of Sankaracharya, acknowledging wherein that the act of renunciation entails a formal closing of social linkages for the renunciant, he also at the same time delineates the almost inevitable and continuing social associations of the renunciant.

> He is not anyone's kin or foe, nor dependent on anyone. He expects nothing and feels no bondage or obligations. He has renounced social and religious life from within. Nevertheless,

> his condition does not amount in practice to a total renunciation of society since he depends on the institution of mendicancy… Nor is the liberated person without a social role even though that role cannot be reduced to a stereotype. The liberated person presents a living example of how saintliness may be practically realized and thus functions as a source of idealistic inspiration. He also functions as that rare kind of teacher who helps the continuation of the tradition of spiritual wisdom. This may be described as *lokasaṁgraha* at the highest level (Pande, 2004, p. 242).

It is interesting that the institutional beginnings of renunciation in India, as in Greece, are almost consistently traceable to social recoil. 'This concept of *sramanya*, *mauna* or *sannyasa* is reminiscent of the Cynic concept of *apathia* and the associated attitude of withdrawal and protest towards the religious and public life of the *Polis*' (Ibid., p. 246). Traversing social and historical stages, it was subsequently conceived by certain religious philosophies, in India and elsewhere, as not simply a preparatory but a final way of living, and this was even formalised with various codes. 'Although the ideal of mendicancy meant the renunciation of social life, this renunciation itself came to be clearly converted into a social institution' (Ibid.). The *Bhagavadgita* in its 18th and final chapter opens with enumerating the definitions of *sanyas* and is especially critical of renunciation for the abandonment of duty. It is relevant to note, that in this it categorises as highest that category of renunciation which also entails the dispassionate fulfilment of duties—'But he who performs a prescribed duty as a thing that ought to be done, renouncing all attachment and also the fruit—his relinquishment is regarded as one of "goodness"'.[2]

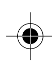
Renunciation appears generally as an individual-centric action that might germinate in criticism of 'society' and even in social disenchantment, but it may not for that reason be construed also as containing naturally a critique of particular social arrangements. This

[2] *Karyam ity eva yat karma/ niyatam kriyate arjuna/sangatam tyaktava phalam cati 'va/sa tyagah sattviko matah*'—verse 8, chapter xviii, *The Bhagavadgita*, Radhakrishnan (trans. & ed.) 1982.

might possibly explain the absence, in the renunciant, of a theoretical interrogation of the institution of property. This attitude of *sanyas* towards property mirrors its attitude to the institution of family as well.[3] *Sanyas* is not thereby generally indifferent to social injustice. The Mahayana, rather than the Hinayana, viewpoint is instructive in this connection. Compared to the Hinayana view of *sanyas* being a completely individual striving for personal *moksha* or release from existence in the temporal universe, the Mahayana illustrates the praxis of the Boddhisatva who opts for repeated births and existence in society till all of humanity is released from suffering. On this plane, *sanyas* instils sensitivity for the suffering of others, and *karuna* or compassion for the other translates into action for alleviation of general suffering. It may be possible to trace Vivekananda's position on renunciation, and his programme of social action to this tradition. Occasionally, Vivekananda has been seen in a certain kinship with the Buddha. 'Vivekananda repeatedly points out that the Buddha had preached the "monastic vow" all over India. He had deeply impressed on the mind of India that ideal of renunciation' (Joshi, 1983, p. 210).

Even before the arrival of modernity, *sanyas* was, in addition to being an act of faith, occasionally perceived in India as a symbol of social iconoclasm for a Hindu and liberating, and the renunciant's 'unorthodoxy in religious beliefs and behaviour was tolerated—or even revered, if it caught the popular imagination' (Heimsath, 1964, p. 9). Vivekananda's understanding of *sanyas* reads: 'A Sannyasin cannot belong to any religion, for his is a life of independent thought, which draws from all religions; his is a life of realisation, not merely of theory or belief, much less of dogma' (Swami Vivekananda, 1948–97, vol. V, p. 187). Furthermore, the hermitage was not envisioned as a retreat from the intricacies of living and its responsibility towards society, but as an instrument of cooperation, an institution to 'make men'. In the closing years of his life, Vivekananda continued to emphasise on what could be termed as the social consciousness in the life of the monks: 'Those of you who are Sannyasins must try to do well to others for

[3] I am grateful to Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya for this interpretation of the relationship between *sanyas* and the social consciousness.



Sannyas means that' (Ibid., vol. III, p. 446). The monks were to love death, not as in a suicidal desire for martyrdom, but in the effacing of the 'self'; 'It is right for you that you should serve your millions of brothers rather than aggrandize this little self. Thus you must die a gradual death.' The monk was visualised not as an individual engrossed in esoteric thinking only, but one who also felt responsible 'for the millions' and yet was 'strong and inflexible', being removed from the pressures of quotidian living. 'In our country the old idea is, to sit in a cave and meditate and die. To go ahead of others in salvation is wrong. One must learn sooner or later, that one cannot get salvation if one does not try to seek the salvation of his brothers. You must try to combine in your life immense idealism with immense practicality. You must be prepared to go into deep meditation now, and the next moment you must be ready to go and cultivate the fields. You must be prepared to explain the difficult intricacies of the Shastras now, and the next moment to go and sell the produce of the fields in the market. You must be prepared for all menial services, not only here, but else where also…. The true man is he who is strong as strength itself and yet possesses a woman's heart' (Ibid., p. 447). The hermitage of Vivekananda is consciously different from an *Anandamath*, in fact it is difficult to say whether Vivekananda has on record said anything about the book, and I cannot say for sure, but he perhaps never evoked the phrase 'Vande Mataram'. His primary concern as he stated was man-making, and his philosophy in choosing the life of a monk to work for national regeneration may also be constituted either as a commentary, or a paradox, in the context of societal urges: 'Each nation has its own peculiar method of work. Some work through politics, some through social reform, some through other lines. With us religion is the only ground along which we can move. The Englishman can understand religion even through politics. Perhaps the American can understand religion even through social reform. But the Hindu can understand even politics when it is given through religion; sociology must come through religion, every thing must come through religion. For that is the theme, the rest are variations in the national life music' (Ibid., p. 314). It is significant that he had this to say in the context of his times. At a time when as a consequence of the colonial experience, for the first time Indian public discourse was becoming increasingly political in nature and when the major social questions of the day

appeared to have answers primarily in political mobilization and legislative reform, and when for the first time a government was perceived to have an agenda of political interventions for changing the texture of Indian society through the enactment of laws, Vivekananda chose to introduce a note of caution in the reformist certitude that mere political action would suffice as means to eradicate deep-seated prejudices and such practices in Indian society. 'Political ideals, personages representing political ideals, even social ideals, would have no power in India' (Ibid., p. 32). This statement was at least partially accurate, especially of his times, and perhaps even for some later decades, although subsequently individuals representing primarily socio-political ideals did come to acquire significant power in Indian public life. It is another matter, that some even among them acquired religious associations with the passing years. With Vivekananda, religion was not surrogate politics, and his religious vision actually bore the imprint of his teacher, who had been to his disciple, the embodiment of an immaculate faith in the harmony of all religious: 'He criticized no one. For years I lived with that man, but never did I hear those lips utter one word of condemnation for any sect. He had the same sympathy for all sects; he had found the harmony between them' (Ibid., vol. IV, p. 174).

This aspect of Vivekananda's life reflected to a great extent, in the Indian context, the essentially moral enquiry of the 19th century Russian thinkers and writers into the human condition that has been described so felicitously by Berlin:

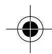
> Their approach seemed to me essentially moral: they were concerned most deeply with what was responsible for injustice, oppression, falsity in human relations, imprisonment whether by stone walls or conformism—unprotesting submission to man-made yokes—moral blindness, egoism, cruelty, humiliation, servitude, poverty, helplessness, bitter indignation, despair, on the part of so many. In short, they were concerned with the nature of these experiences and their roots in the human condition; the condition of Russia in the first place, but, by implication, of all mankind. And conversely they wished to know what would bring about the exact opposite of this, a reign of truth, love, honesty, justice,

> security, personal relations based on the possibility of human dignity, decency, independence, freedom, spiritual fulfilment (1990, p. 3).

Admittedly for Vivekananda, colonial rule was to an extent responsible for degradation and an impediment to material and spiritual progress, but he was equally aware of the deleterious features of the Indian tradition. As a monk—and it needs to be clearly stated that Vivekananda's criticism of many of India's mores was uncontrived and did not follow from any imagined sense of his social unassailability—Vivekananda was uniquely placed to criticise Indian traditions as well, and relatively immune from the familiar allegations of being a cultural renegade for personal gain, he 'wrote perhaps the most biting, articulate, and bitter condemnations in recent times of the physical misery and misguided beliefs of most Indians' (Heimsath, 1964, p. 25). From the early stages of his work, Vivekananda's stated objective was, unlike the doctrinaire and cultish aims of most religious missions, 'to bring to the door of the meanest, the poorest, the noble ideas that the human race has developed both in and out of India, and let them think for themselves' (Swami Vivekananda, 1948–97, vol. V, p. 25). Significantly, the religious ideas of Vivekananda were extremely progressive and totally against any privileging of ideas or positions. In this, they indicate, both theoretically and practically, towards reconciling and egalitarianising possibilities. This recommendation by Vivekananda to the renunciant is relevant for the godmen of our times as it was also a commentary on the existing practices of his times: 'The Sannyasin should have nothing to do with the rich, his duty is with the poor. The Sannyasin should treat the poor with loving care and serve them joyfully with all his might. To pay respects to the rich and hang on them for support has been the bane of all the Sannyasin communities of our country. A true Sannyasin should scrupulously avoid that' (Ibid., p. 188). Vivekananda was especially harsh on the notions of caste superiority and sacerdotal institutions that propagated the doctrine of *adhikarvada*, which supposed a hierarchy of eligibility along caste lines in higher knowledge, as being 'pernicious to the core': 'With all my respects for the Rishis of yore I cannot but denounce their method in instructing the people' (Ibid., p. 190). Uniquely, Vivekananda elevated commitment to the deprived, movingly calling them *daridra*

narayana (God the poor), to the plane of religious duty. The idea of being conscientious to the deprivation of those who do not normally share our class interests may have interesting theoretical possibilities in the context of recent concerns regarding universal responsibility for the 'other', and how any such responsibility generally operates within, and is limited by, elective affinities or structural commonality of class, race, ability, and gender.[4] The idea of the *daridra narayana* exceeds mere sense of obligation in the sense of institutional charity, and implies added and crucial responsibility on the part of the benefactor for maintaining the dignity and respect of the beneficiary. Vivekananda's renunciation and sense of social responsibility included both the denying of many prevalent notions of status and privilege and of conversely prioritising the virtue of service to the deprived as being a redemptive duty on the part of the enabled and the provisioned. General benefit and protective discrimination were for him not mutually exclusive: 'If there is equality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all—or if greater for some and for some less—the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, a Brahmin is not so much in need of education as a Chandala. If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten' (Ibid., vol. VI, p. 287). This may be relatable to the often fraught relationship between justice and dignity in matters of institutional aid to the dispossessed and the destitute, whether due to the general implication of a slur of inferiority on the part of the recipient, or due to an insensitive or callous even if efficient system of distribution of aid, which degrades people, for instance by reducing starving humans to fighting for food thrown from trucks as in famine stricken Ethiopia. Avishai Margalit mentions this example in his argument that ensuring welfare does not necessarily extend to ensuring dignity, and that a just society need not by that quality alone be a decent society. A different level of ethical responsibility and another conception of human life may be a condition for facilitating a merging of social responsibility with the values of kindness and caring. 'There is a suspicion that the just society may become mired in rigid calculations of what is just, which may replace gentleness and humane consideration in simple human relations. The requirements that a just

[4] Young (2011), which discusses responses to, among others, Derrida, Sartre and Levinas. It can serve as a reference for future reading related to the theme of, and debates on, social responsibility.



society should also be a decent one means that it is not enough for goods to be distributed justly and efficiently—the style of their distribution must also be taken into account' (Margalit, 1996, pp. 280–81).

In an increasingly secularising period of history, a purely religious definition of the values of caring could soon become meaningless in modern society. Vivekananda in acknowledging and analysing the limitations of denominational self-definitions also indicated at the constructive possibility of pluralistic perceptions. During the building of the Ramakrishna Mission he continued to work for an accommodation of 'a thousand minds' in its institutions. It was in this tradition that he welcomed Muslim boys in the institutions run by the Mission, and suggested making separate arrangements for them if necessary, yet told the brethren to 'never tamper with their religion' (Ibid., p. 370). His stated aspiration for the Mission was: 'We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran' (Ibid., p. 376).

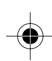
There is substantial evidence in Vivekananda's writings which pointedly and unambiguously show that he was neither a Hindu zealot, nor a propagator of hegemonist values. In spite of the fact that his metaphysical vocabulary is predominantly Hindu, and that he spoke from within a tradition, the pertinent inquiry perhaps would be regarding his employing of that tradition. He attempted to posit that tradition against the practised divisions of creed and caste, and in matters of social reform, spoke of the advisability of first identifying the 'necessity underlying' an uncivil custom and then by altering the necessity thereby eradicating the custom. It might be relevant to indicate at this point that Rabindranath Tagore included prominently Vivekananda in the continuing tradition that had begun with 'Chaitanya, Nanak, Dadu, Kabir' of harmonising the varied communities of India, and particularly of building a bridge of ideals across the Hindu and the Muslim character. Of his own times Tagore remarked: 'It is not as if India is inactive [in this regard] now—Rammohun Roy, Swami Dayananda, Keshabchandra [Sen], Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Vivekananda, Shibnarayan Swami—they have surrendered into India's hands their

life's praxis to establish—the one in many, the great into the small' (Tagore, 1986–92, vol. V, p. 763; my translation). According to Vivekananda, traditional concepts did not need final excision from contemporary minds as they could even be re-envisioned to serve not only as records of unfairness and inequity, but also as conceptual spaces for the institution of rapprochement among historically embittered identities. His criticism of *Adhikarvada* has been mentioned above. He viewed it not only as a shortcoming but also as evidence of mal-intent on the part of the proponents of the doctrine, and found it 'the outcome of pure selfishness'. 'They knew that by this they would lose their superior position of instructors to the people. Hence their endeavour to support their theory. If you consider a man too weak to receive these lessons you should try to teach and educate him; you should give him the advantage of more teaching, instead of less, to train up his intellect, so as to enable him to comprehend the more subtle problems. These advocates of *Adhikarvada* ignored the tremendous fact of the infinite possibilities of the human soul' (Swami Vivekananda, 1948–97, vol. V, p. 190).

Vivekananda aimed at the elimination of the duality of identity that was present in the educated classes even when they were sensitive to social marginalization and dispossession, and even in the discourse of social responsibility society seemed to be eternally divided between the *bhadralok* and the *chhotolok*, the cultured and the plebe.

> Our aristocratic ancestors went on treading the common masses of our country underfoot, till they became helpless, till under this torment the poor, poor people nearly forgot that they were human beings. They have been compelled to be merely hewers of wood and drawers of water for centuries, so much so that they are made to believe that they are born as slaves, born as hewers of wood and drawers of water. With all our boasted education of modern times, if anybody says a kind word for them, I often find our men shrink at once from the duty of lifting them up, those poor downtrodden people (Ibid., vol. III, p. 192).

The failure of mainstream nationalism to effectively cultivate a social consciousness personified among others by Vivekananda is reflected



even in the religious order which he had founded, in its promoting of a discourse obscuring the progressive elements of his thought, and limiting him to merely a charisma in the transactions of change and reconciliation. It has been acknowledged, and continues to be emphasized, that militant Indian nationalism sought inspiration from Vivekananda's appeal for renunciation of narrow interests for larger ends, but it is not usually understood that the impact of his message was partial. Tapan Raychaudhuri has aptly observed: 'The self sacrificing revolutionaries of the early twentieth century had little understanding of the sannyasi's anguished empathy for starving people. Evidently even sacrifice of life itself came easier than the effort to transcend the limits of middle class consciousnesses' (2006, p. 250).

The Responsible Nation

The 'nation' had been for long perceived among liberals as foci of retrogressive fancies, and by socialists as a 'historically conditioned illusion' which evidently camouflaged the inner conflicts and the exploitation of moribund societies. But people humiliated by foreign rule have been particularly susceptible to recreate the impetus of what Schiller called the 'bent twig'—described by Isaiah Berlin as, 'by lashing back and refusing to accept their alleged inferiority'(1990. p. 246). The consequently created nations have historically failed to inculcate a collective social conscience, and generally failed to practise the virtues of a caring society even within their national homes: many have embarked on careers of aggrandisement in favour of their own elites, and at home the elites have procreated or preserved exploitative cultures. The lived experience of the 19th century gave to Vivekananda a proximity to the unfolding of the national spirit, and it is undeniable that much of his activity was directed for a resurgent homeland. However, he is powerfully relevant for advocating the values of a responsible nation. On one plane, this advocacy consisted of alerting his countrymen, both to the dangers of the 'huge wave of nationalism' that he had seen sweeping over Europe during his travels in the Continent and to the ill-effects of revanchist militarization. 'But who is to ultimately supply the funds? Consequently the peasants have to put on tattered rags—while in towns you will find soldiers dressed in gorgeous uniforms. Throughout Europe there is a craze for soldiers—

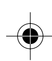
soldiers everywhere' (Swami Vivekananda, 1948–97, vol. VII, p. 374). His vision of the future India was totally non-militaristic and non-xenophobic: 'No man, no nation, my son, can hate others and live. India's doom was sealed the very day they invented the word *Mlechchcha* and stopped from communion with others' (Ibid., vol. V, p. 40). On another plane, he was sceptical and dismissive of conventional patriotism: 'Everyone wants me to come over to India. They think we shall be able to do more if I come. They are mistaken my friend. The present enthusiasm is only a little patriotism, it means nothing' (Ibid., p. 39). Moreover, he never ceased reminding his compatriots of the institutional and structural injustices that were also implicated in the otherwise impressive cultural heritage of the country. A sense of responsibility for deprivation in society, and the undertaking of restitutive acts at both the individual and collective levels, were considered by him to be crucial for the rectification of these injustices in the future nation. In stating that he was 'no metaphysician' but as one who being poor, loved the poor, he was indicating at an ethics of community. 'So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them! I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all the money by grinding the poor, wretches, so long as they do not do anything for those two hundred millions who are now no better than hungry savages' (Ibid., p. 45).

During the Indian independence movement, the colonial administration at one point initiated surveillance of the Ramakrishna Mission, and eventually took punitive measures including dissolution of the organisation, when it transpired that revolutionaries in Bengal were impressed with the life and thought of Vivekananda, and many of them carried copies of his writings. Public representations in support of the Mission ultimately averted its dissolution by the government. However, this fact in itself does not adequately explain the British government's hostility to the Ramakrishna Mission. The government's unfriendliness to the Ramakrishna Mission can be attributed not so much as to a substantive perception on its part regarding Vivekananda's aggressive nationalistic inclinations and his appeal also among young political extremists, as perhaps more to a residual antagonism of the government towards *sadhus* in general. *Sadhus* were seen wishfully

by the government as being overtly and rather violently political, and thereupon presented with unsavoury character in police dossiers. There was no doubt quite an enduring political activism in certain monastic orders. In his interesting study of some such 'subaltern' monastic orders, William R. Pinch dismisses British allegations regarding the many moral failings of the *sadhus*. Although the *sanyasis* of the Mission might not be typified under this rubric, they certainly would have received part of the government's general antipathy towards monks as a potentially political group, markedly evident in governmental circles with the later rise of Gandhian mass politics. Pinch says, for *sadhus* palpably involved with political programmes, that their 'political actions were a function of their religious and philosophical commitment' rather than a personal and ideological failing (1996, p. 9). It will be crucial to remember that Vivekananda's national sentiment was part of his spiritual-reformist ardour. Amiya P. Sen illustratively observes a living commitment in Vivekananda's remaining steadfast towards apparently two inconsistent objectives: 'an immensely practical, this-worldly approach and the supra-worldly construct of pure transcendence' (2013, p. 101). However, the discussion on *sanyas* and the social consciousness, earlier in the paper, has perhaps adequately indicated that in the life of a extraordinary individual, there need be no inconsistency between spiritual pursuit and amelioration of others' suffering. Differently, Vivekananda has been described as an aggressive nationalist in studies such as that by Bhupendranath Dutta.[5] Datta's argument, outlined in the opening two pages of his Foreword to his book, is however not substantiated by references to recorded statements by Vivekananda, and most allusions to his nationalistic intents and programmes in the book are through narrative, and largely uncorroborated, accounts. Christopher Isherwood states:

> However it is not at all surprising that [Vivekananda] has been much misunderstood; that parts of his message, taken out of context, have been presented as a whole. Even some of his brother monks, at the time of the founding of the Mission, were afraid that he was deviating from Ramakrishna's aims. And there have been some, in much recent times, who have claimed him as a socialist and a nationalist revolutionary. They wish, in all sincerity, to honour

[5] For details see Datta (1993).



> Vivekananda as a great Indian patriot, and they are right as far as they go. But their statue of him would have to be a headless torso; Vivekananda without Ramakrishna (2007, p. 326).[6]

Vivekananda's bitter protestations—which are totally undenotive of any kind of violent nationalism—against missionary propaganda are better understood in the frame of a larger, including European, disgust against the racist core of colonial philosophy. This encapsulates a different nationalist idea. Berlin's reference, in another context, to Herder's astringent critique of racist presumptions of European evangelism may indicate such a frame. Herder relates mordantly a cultural situation: '"Why are you pouring water over my head?" asked a dying slave of a Christian missionary. "So that you can go to heaven." "I do not want to go to a heaven where there are white men," he replied, and turned on his side and died' (2000, p. 185).

It would involve a detailed discussion in comparing Vivekananda's imagination of India with some of the other colonial imaginings of free nationhood, but it might be suitably illustrative for our argument to refer very briefly to some such concerns of reform and change. In the traditional societies such as in Africa with a different social history than that of India, and without a doctrine of established social exclusivity, anti-colonial writing evidences an uncomplicated defence of traditional social structure apropos the colonising administration. For instance, Aime Cesaire, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, defends unqualifiedly the traditional structures and practices of colonised societies.

> Every day that passes, every denial of justice, every beating by the police, every demand of the workers that is drowned in blood, every scandal that is hushed up, every punitive expedition, every police van, every gendarme and every

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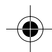
[6] Peter Heehs, a veteran scholar who has observed in detail the nuances of the nationalistic idea in Bengal, similarly agrees: 'It is possible, by taking passages from Vivekananda's writings out of context, to make him look like a consciously nationalistic figure. But if one goes through the *Complete Works* dispassionately one is forced to conclude that Vivekananda never ceased to regard his mission as a spiritual one' (2004, p. 25).



> militiaman, brings home to us the value of our old societies. They were communal societies, never societies of the many for the few. They were societies that were not only ante-capitalist, as has been said, but also *anti-capitalist*. They were democratic societies, always. They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies. I make a systematic defense of the societies destroyed by imperialism (2010, p. 44).

It is quite needless to point out that Vivekananda hardly thought that all traditional Indian social practices were salutary. The Tunisian philosopher and analyser of colonialism, Albert Memmi, described the creation of what he calls a 'countermythology', wherein the colonised turns to an unapologetic defence of native traditions to salvage the image of his country's culture in his own eyes. This unnecessary, and erroneous, glorification indicates as much as to an innate inadequacy on the part of the colonised subject, as to reluctance on his part to constructively engage with the issue of rediscovering his tradition. But it most certainly should not be deduced that the distinguished thinker Cesaire can even remotely be comprised in this category. In India this perhaps happened most uncomplicatedly to some of the young generation which had taken an unalloyed pleasure in debunking traditional values before they became excessively valiant in their championing of indigenous cultural values and religious principles. Tagore had likened this tendency to a kind of dipsomania. For Memmi this certainly was the case in the context of African colonialism. It is worth quoting him in some detail.

> Now, the young intellectual who had broken with religions, internally at least, and ate during Ramadan, begins to fast with ostentation. He who considered the rites as inevitable family drudgery, reintroduces them into his social life, gives them a place in his conception of the world. To use them better, he re-explains the forgotten messages and adapts them to present-day needs… Of course, there is a considerable risk that the means become the end. Assigning attention to old myths, giving them virility, he regenerates them dangerously (1967, pp. 132–33).

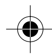
This proceeds to the countermythology that is now created by the coloniser. 'Suddenly, exactly to the reverse of the colonialist accusation, the colonized, his culture, his country, everything that belongs to him,

everything he represents, becomes perfectly positive elements… everything is good, everything must be retained among his customs and traditions, his actions and plans; even the anachronous or disorderly, the immoral or mistaken. Everything is justified because everything can be explained' (Ibid., pp. 138–39).

The savage fun that Vivekananda made of those that aspired to preserve unexceptionally all traditional customs and rites in Bengal is too well known to need further comment. However, the tangible enlargement in the scope and the social possibility of the modern religious consciousness becomes prominently noticeable with Vivekananda. His admiration of tradition is simultaneously fused with incisive criticism of a host of social practices. In his imagination of modern India he is comparable to the great reformer modernist, Ram Mohun Roy. In spite of his criticism of Roy's approach to religion in matters of reform, Nivedita's account of a conversation with him at Nainital provides an indication of his envisioning himself as continuing with Roy's efforts for a modern Indian consciousness. Speaking in detail of Roy, Vivekananda drew intellectual kinship with him regarding Vedantism, patriotism, and indiscriminative feeling for Hindu Muslim alike. 'In all these things he claimed himself to have taken up the task that the breadth and foresight of Ram Mohan Roy had mapped out' (Swami Vivekananda, 1948–97, vol. IX, p. 341).

Bernard Williams regards religious ethics as being intrinsically problematic: 'The trouble with religious morality comes not from morality's being inescapably pure, but from religion's being incurably unintelligible' (Williams, 1993, p. 72). But a renunciant like Vivekananda could naturally merge the religious and the ethical, even perhaps on the most difficult plane, in sincerely adhering to tradition while being critical of it to a degree that effectively has the potential of recreating that tradition. He might have achieved this to an admirable extent because of his independent exposing of revivalist ambitions. His depiction of the beginning of modern convergence of orthodoxies that had already become noticeable in his time deserves mention.

> We, on account of caste distinctions, have among ourselves far stronger feelings of hate and scorn against one another; and who can say that the Brahmans, if they get some foolish



> unenlightened kshatriya king on their side, will not graciously try again to 'cut out the sudras' tongue and chop off their limbs?' That recently in Eastern Aryavarta, the different caste-people seem to develop a feeling of united sympathy amidst themselves with a view to ameliorate their present social condition—that, in the Mahratta country, the Brahamans have begun to sing paeans in praise of the 'Maratha' race—these, the lower castes cannot yet believe to be the outcome of pure disinterestedness (Ibid., vol. IV, p. 407).

Vivekananda called the so called 'upper castes' as the 'void, the unsubstantiated non-entities of the future'. He hoped that the new India would arise, 'out of the peasants' cottage grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fisherman, the cobbler, and the sweeper' (Ibid., vol. VII, p. 309). He had presciently observed that conflict between nations derives from within intra-national contentions, and that countries shift the focus of their communities away from domestic disputes through issues of foreign policy: 'Now, we all know about the petty jealousies and quarrels that we have in our country. Take my word, it is the same everywhere. The other nations with their political lives have foreign policies. When they find too much quarrelling at home, they look for somebody abroad to quarrel with and the quarrel at home stops' (Ibid., vol. III, p. 316). He recognised and appreciated the beginnings of a convergence of civilizations, and the inevitable knitting of countries into a global community which would require more reflection and less belligerence on the part of nations, and also innovative protocols of international understanding: 'Even in politics and sociology, problems that were only national twenty years ago can no more be solved on national grounds only. They can only be solved when looked at in the broader light of international grounds. International organizations, international combinations, international laws are the cry of the day' (Ibid., p. 241).

The ideas of Vivekananda regarding the ethics of community and nation offer complex and significant readings in contemporary contexts. His thinking is evidently not acquiescent to ideologies that are fixative over control and censorship of community aspirations through modes and institutions which may be either sectarian or secular, and his insistent ethics and openness constitute a difficult interrogatory for aspiring fanaticisms across the political spectrum.

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