Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Balanced assessments of the socio-political impact of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) are quite rare, as the tendency either to excessively glorify or unfairly condemn: Vivekananda, Hinduism, Vedanta, and Hindu nationalism, usually dominates any debate on the issue. Shamina Basu’s latest book, Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth Century Bengal, is, therefore, a welcome break with this tradition.

By Victor A. van Bijlert

Swami Basu’s approach to Vivekananda’s role in Indian nationalism is inspired by post-Marxist, Subaltern Studies, and Cultural Studies, but her allegiance to the Subaltern approach is evident from her references to Antonio Gramsci’s views on the role of philosophers as opinion-leaders of the masses. Of crucial importance in this study is Ms Basu’s emphasis on social and political mobilization through internalized religion. Rather than shy away from the troubled issue of religion, she tries to present its liberating potential, especially through Swami Vivekananda’s attempt to mould it into an ideology of modernity, nation-unity, and equality.

What was the great achievement of Vivekananda in comparison with so many other Hindu religious reformers in the nineteenth century? According to Basu, Vivekananda ‘wanted to advocate a form of Hinduism that was a far cry from the parochial version of the religion which the orthodox Hindu leaders wanted to popularize’. The Swami tried to propagate a form of Hinduism that would offer a ‘common ground of spiritual unity among all the religions and sects’. To achieve this goal in ‘India, in which every community would have its own cultural space, [this Hinduism] would require a conception of religion whose spiritual openness would provide the cultural framework to accommodate diversities and enable a democratic nation to hold itself together’ (p. 129). Vivekananda’s recon-STRUCTION of what was then standard Vedantic Hinduism ‘would be capable of claiming legitimacy for itself not as a religion but as a universal moral philos-ophy’ (p. 129). According to Vivekananda, the meta-physical principles of ethics lay in the following argument: if I injure others, I am in a deep metaphysical sense injuring myself, because the one Uni-verse is all in all. This realisation ‘provided the spiritual ground for ethical action, and it was argued that the universal philosophy of Advaita provided for the spiritual man kind as a whole’ (p. 184). The con-cept of the universal Soul thus provided a solid foundation to the idea of nationalism and Indian identi-ty. Basu argues that ‘Vivekananda claimed that the social significance of religion must be perceived in its abili-ty to offer a comprehensive philosophy of ethical action’ (p. 185). Vivekananda’s philosophy of nation-building, along these Vedantic lines was a great source of inspiration for the radical Indian nationalists of the early twentieth cen-tury.

Drawing on contemporary social and cultural theory, as well as many nineteenth-century Bengal documents, printed and in manuscript form, Shamina Basu presents a novel and imaginative analysis of Vivekananda’s position in Indian social and political history and his influence on Indian philosophy.

Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict

W ith these words, A. Aiyappan ended his Itavas and Culture Change (1942), in which he reflected on rapid change among Backward Classes in India generally and to mobility, as well as to the understanding of processes of social change among Backward Classes in India generally and to Kerala Studies in particular.

The book is based on three years of fieldwork done during the years 1989 and 1996 in a multi-community village in Southern Kerala. The Osellas tell us that their book is an attempt to look at Aiyappan’s predictions and expectations for the future of his community. Focusing on lives lived in the twentieth century, the book argues that the Itavas, a numerically large ‘low’ caste concentrated in Kerala, have an ‘ethos of mobili-ty’, and attempts to explore this modern search for upward social mobility - the processes it involves, the ideolo-gies which support or thwart it and what happens to the people involved in it.

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The book ends with brief discussions of both of their own family histories, which is an attempt to counter the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Aiyappan, him-self an Itava, was a prominent social anthropologist. Fillipo and Caroline Osella tell us that their book is an attempt to look at Aiyappan’s predictions and expectations for the future of his community. Focusing on lives lived in the twentieth century, the book argues that the Itavas, a numerically large ‘low’ caste concentrated in Kerala, have an ‘ethos of mobility’, and attempts to explore this modern search for upward social mobility - the processes it involves, the ideologies which support or thwart it and what happens to the people involved in it.

By Janaki Abraham

‘Caste is what caste does. When the insistence on touch taboos, and eating taboos, and on endogamy becomes less rigid, as it is now, the fundamentals of caste become correspondingly shaky, and then it is only a question of time for the superstructure to totter’.

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The above in fact bears on the Osellas’ understanding of the social significance of religion must be perceived in its ability to offer a comprehensive philosophy of ethical action’ (p. 185). Vivekananda’s philosophy of nation-building, along these Vedantic lines was a great source of inspiration for the radical Indian nationalists of the early twentieth century.

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Janaki Abraham, MA teaches in a college in Delhi University and is working on a PhD at the Sociology Department, Delhi University.

E-mail: janaka@vsnl.com / janakaabraham@hotmail.com