

Swami Vivekananda's Thoughts on Industrialization

[This article is based on a lecture in Bengali delivered by Sri Nabaniharan Mukhopadhyay, President, Akhil Bharat Vivekananda Yuva Mahamandal, at Jadavpur University, Calcutta]

The holistic approach of Swamiji

To discuss Swami Vivekananda's ideas on industry or on anything else, we have to take a wider background. Swamiji's learning was encyclopedic, and his ideas were holistic. It was not a piecemeal approach: this idea for this issue and that idea for another issue and so on! His life was wholly dedicated for the overall welfare of humanity as a whole. He found the root of all problems in man himself and gave us a master plan to solve them at the root. So, he concentrated on the individual and gave a philosophy of life that can be applied practically *to make proper men* of them. If we apply them today, we shall get proper men in large numbers in all fields. Without such men no policy will be of any use. He was deeply concerned about every issue relevant to all round development of man, and his versatile genius made original contributions with right ideas, which are fully relevant now. But man-making was to him the fundamental necessity and the foremost precondition in any line of growth.

Direct experience of India and her economy

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, he first united the young brother-disciples, who renounced the world for the good of humanity. Then he travelled through the length and breadth of the country, to come face to face with the *real* national life. He saw India with his own eyes, and very deeply felt in his heart her agonies, her sufferings and weaknesses. The condition of the poor, the ignorant, and the oppressed made him restless, sleepless. And to find a way out for them he reached the shores of America in 1893. We hear that he went there to speak on religion at the Parliament of Religions. But that was not his objective, which he explained in a lecture in Madras:

'I did not go to America, as most of you know, for the Parliament of Religions, but this demon of a feeling was in me and within my soul. I travelled twelve years all over India, finding no way to work for my countrymen, and that is why I went to America. Most of you know that, who knew me then. Who cared about this Parliament of Religions? Here was my own flesh and blood sinking every day, and who cared for them? This was my first step.' (*Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 226*)

He saw the old system of Indian economy was shattered, while a new one was not even in anybody's contemplation. Only a few mills and factories came up in India in the second half of the nineteenth century. So, Swamiji was interested that industry and scientific agriculture should come to India, in order to rebuild her economy and create gainful employment for the masses. He encouraged scientific learning and research for the development of the people. He wanted to make India modern and self-sufficient. He said about our economic condition under the British rule:

A nation that cannot provide for its simple food and clothing, which always depends on others for its subsistence – what is there for it to vaunt about? Throw your religious observances overboard for the

present and be first prepared for the struggle for existence. People of foreign countries are turning out such golden results from the raw materials produced in your country, and you, like asses of burden, are only carrying their load. The people of foreign countries import Indian raw goods, manufacture various commodities by bringing their intelligence to bear upon them, and become great; whereas you have locked up your intelligence, thrown away your inherited wealth to others, and roam about crying piteously for food. (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 145*)

‘India is restless with the thought of how to face this spectre of hunger. The draining of the best resources of the country by the foreigners, the unrestricted exports of merchandise, and, above all, the abominable jealousy natural to slaves are eating into the vitals of India. First of all, you must remove this evil of hunger and starvation, this constant anxiety for bare existence...’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 380*)

Unfolding ideas of industrialization in India

On his way to Chicago from Japan, Sir Jamshedji Tata was his co-passenger. According to Mahendranath Dutta, Swamiji asked him, by way of suggestion, ‘Why do you import matchbox from Japan and allow them to take away the major share of the money? By that you can earn only a small profit. If you manufacture it in India, you can earn more, while some people will get employment, and the money of our country will remain there.’ It seems he also discussed the need for technical education in India. Tata wrote a beautiful letter to him five years later, on 23 November 1898, in which he said:

‘I trust, you remember me as a fellow-traveller on your voyage from Japan to Chicago. I very much recall at this moment your views on the growth of the ascetic spirit in India, and the duty, not of destroying, but of diverting it into useful channels.

‘I recall these ideas in connection with my scheme of Research Institute for Science for India... and I know not who would make a more fitting general of such a campaign than Vivekananda.’ (*Life of Swami Vivekananda, by His Eastern and Western Disciples, Vol. 2, p. 397*)

Even before the Parliament of Religions, when he was yet to become famous, an American newspaper reported on 29 August 1893 about a talk given by Swamiji:

‘He said the missionaries had fine theories there and started in with good ideas, but had done nothing for the industrial condition of the people. He said Americans, instead of sending out missionaries to train them in religion, would better send some one out to give them industrial education.... The speaker explained his mission in his country to be to organise monks for industrial purposes, that they might give the people the benefit of this industrial education and thus elevate them and improve their condition.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 466*)

The report was not wholly correct. It was only a part of his plan. As we shall see later, it was to become a part of the Methods of Action of the Ramakrishna Mission established by him in 1897. Another newspaper reported on 5 September on another talk by him:

‘The great need of India today, which is not the India of fifty years ago, is, he said, missionaries to educate the people industrially and socially and not religiously.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 469*)

Swamiji’s understanding of economics

At the World Fair then going on in Chicago, Swamiji observed the developments in science and technology with keen interest and concluded that ‘it would be to India’s profit if its people could have some of America’s industrial advancement and civilization’. He delved in the thought of a plan for industrialization in India. For that one has to have enough acquaintance with economics. We are indeed amazed to see his understanding of this subject. Before appearing at the Parliament of Religions, at the invitation of American Social Science

Association, he spoke on 6 September on 'The Use of Silver in India', and it was lauded by a local newspaper. It was a very difficult subject of monetary economics. The issue of the Gold and Silver Standards was being debated in the United States. William Jennings Bryan, a Democrat Representative at the US Congress from Nebraska from 1891 to 1895, advocated the Silver Standard for the betterment of the common masses. Three years later, on 1 November 1896, Swamiji wrote from London:

'I do not know all the difficulties about the gold or silver standards (nobody seems to know much as to that), but this much I see that the gold standard has been making the poor poorer, and the rich richer. Bryan was right when he said, "We refuse to be crucified on a cross of gold." The silver standard will give the poor a better chance in this unequal fight. *I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system, but half a loaf is better than no bread.*' (*Complete Works, Vol. 6, p. 381*) [Emphasis added]

The burning need of India

The Parliament of Religions started on 11 September 1893, and that very day Swami Vivekananda became famous. The idea he talked about was: the unity of humanity, the harmony of different religions, the harmony of different philosophical thoughts. That was the new message he brought to the West. On 20 September he said in one of his lectures at the Parliament of Religions:

'You erect churches all through India, but the crying evil in the East is not religion – they have religion enough – but it is bread that the suffering millions of burning India cry out for with parched throats. They ask us for bread, but we give them stones. It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics.' (*Complete Works, Vol. 1, p. 20*)

Initially Swamiji hoped to raise funds for education and industry in India. But in a short time he gave up such hope as impracticable in those days of financial difficulties in America. Moreover, Swamiji realized that India must help herself, if she was to rise again. He wrote to an Indian disciple:

'But you must not depend on any foreign help. Nations, like individuals, must help themselves. This is real patriotism. If a nation cannot do that, its time has not yet come. It must wait.' (*Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 109*)

Freely he gave the West the treasures of the Vedanta for their welfare, with his heart's blood, without asking for anything in return. Its value has not yet been understood anywhere. In 1897 he came back to India. India received him as a victorious hero returning home. And he moved from the South to the North, from Colombo to Almora, and gave a clarion call to his countrymen: 'Arise, awake, sleep no more; within each of you there is the power to remove all wants and all miseries. Believe this, and that power will be manifested.' And he said:

Let us all work hard, my brethren; this is no time for sleep. On our work depends the coming of the India of the future. She is there ready waiting. She is only sleeping. Arise and awake and see her seated here on her eternal throne, rejuvenated, more glorious than she ever was – this motherland of ours. (*Complete Works, Vol. 3, p. 154*)

Technical training for the masses

He advised Indians to be men, full of energy and sympathy for the downtrodden, and to learn science, technology, organization, etc. from the West. For that he planned to spread education throughout the land and called upon the youth to take up the task. Technical training formed an important part of his thoughts on education. That was the starting point, for he knew it would have a multiplier effect and would become the growth engine. He said:

‘What we need, you know, is to study, independent of foreign control, different branches of the knowledge that is our own, and with it the English language and Western science; we need technical education and all else that may develop industries so that men, instead of seeking for service, may earn enough to provide for themselves, and save something against a rainy day.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 368-369*)

What we want are Western science coupled with Vedanta, Brahmacharya as the guiding motto, and also Shraddha and faith in one's own self. (*Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 366*)

Give and take is the law; and if India wants to raise herself once more, it is absolutely necessary that she brings out her treasures and throws them broadcast among the nations of the earth, and in return be ready to receive what others have to give her. (*Complete Works, Vol. 4, p. 365-366*)

That year, on 1 May in Calcutta, the Ramakrishna Mission was founded. On 5 May the aims and objectives of the organization were chalked out: ‘The aim of the Sangha is to preach those truths which Shri Ramakrishna has, for the good of humanity, preached and demonstrated by practical application in his own life, and to help others to put these truths into practice in their lives for their temporal, mental, and spiritual advancement.’ A new thing came up next: the Duty of the Mission. It is ‘the establishment of fellowship among the followers of different religions, knowing them all to be so many forms only of one undying Eternal Religion.’ Then the Methods of Action were prescribed thus:

- (a) To train men so as to make them competent to teach such knowledge or sciences as are conducive to the material and spiritual welfare of the masses;
- (b) to promote and encourage arts and industries; and
- (c) to introduce and spread among the people in general Vedantic and other religious ideas in the way in which they were elucidated in the life of Shri Ramakrishna. (*Life of Swami Vivekananda, by His Eastern and Western Disciples, Vol. 2, p. 248*)

A very important thing is to be noted here carefully. Not just material and economic development, but spiritual development must come side by side. Otherwise, sheer material development will not improve the condition of the masses, as we clearly see in these days of 9% economic growth. He wrote on 30 September that year to Miss MacLeod: ‘Arts and Industries: This part of the programme alone cannot be begun for want of funds. The simplest method to be worked upon at present is *to induce Indians to use their own produce and get markets for Indian artware etc. in other countries*. This should be done by persons who are not only *not middlemen* themselves, but will devote the entire proceeds of this branch to the benefit of the workmen.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 8, p. 425*)[Emphasis added]

Promotion of export

Swamiji held that export to economically advanced countries can not only bring money, but also induce vitality in domestic industries. He was confident that India can have a ready market for many Indian manufactured items in the West. In a letter from New York he wrote:

‘We want an enterprising spirit. Nothing is done by leading idle lives. If anyone forms a company and exports Indian goods here and into England, it will be a good trade. But they are a lazy set, enamoured of child marriage and nothing else.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 6, p. 298*)

While he was at Belur, one day he suggested to a disciple to start trading Indian goods in the West, for which he was eager to provide support:

‘If you cannot procure money, go to foreign countries, working your passage as a Lascar. Take Indian cloth, towels, bamboo-work, and other indigenous products, and peddle in the streets of Europe and America; you will find how greatly Indian products are appreciated in foreign markets even now.... Take, for example, such excellent fabric as the Varanasi-made Saris of India, the like of which are not produced anywhere else in the world. Go to America with this cloth. Have gowns made out of this fabric and sell them, and you will see how much you earn.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 145-146*)

The dangers involved in industrialization

His whole soul was focused on the improvement of the downtrodden. He did not fail to see through dangers of big business usurping small ones, of profiteering, of exploitation, that come along with industrialization. He unmasked the real essence of capitalism, which has now become mightier than ever before, in a lecture delivered in London, the birthplace of industrialization:

‘Machines are making things cheap, making for progress and evolution, but millions are crushed, that one may become rich; while one becomes rich, thousands at the same time become poorer and poorer, and whole masses of human beings are made slaves. That way it is going on.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 96*)

And he observed in reply to a question at the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University, U.S.A., on March 25, 1896:

‘Machines do not solve the poverty question; they simply make men struggle the more. Competition gets keener.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 308*)

He wanted all development on national lines, instead of imitation, so as to suit the Indian situation and benefit the common masses. Sister Nivedita wrote: ‘Like others, he had accepted without thought the assumption that machinery would be a boon to agriculture, but he could now see that while the American farmer, with his several square miles to farm, might be the better for machines, they are like to do little but harm on the tiny farmlands of the Indian peasantry.... In everything including the problem of distribution, he listened with suspicion to all arguments that would work for the elimination of small interests...’ Of the big business conglomerates, he wondered: ‘what beauty of combination was there, amongst a pack of wolves?’ (*The Master As I Saw Him, Sixth Edition, p. 227-228*) ‘Never forget!’ he would say, ‘the word is, “Women and the People!”’ (*ibid., p. 288*)

The problems of the working class

Today we are so proud of our big industrialists, some of whom are among the richest few of the world. Swamiji was extremely proud of our poor workers. He gave them a very high position and recognized their contribution to civilization with great adoration. He lamented that they were exploited and neglected through ages:

‘... it is they who, from time immemorial have been working silently, without even getting the remuneration of their labours! But what great changes are taking place slowly, all over the world, in pursuance of nature's law! Countries, civilisations, and supremacy are undergoing revolutions. Ye labouring classes of India, as a result of your silent, constant labours Babylon, Persia, Alexandria, Greece, Rome, Venice, Genoa, Baghdad, Samarqand, Spain, Portugal, France, Denmark, Holland, and England have successively attained supremacy and eminence! And you? – well, who cares to think of you!... Ye ever-trampled labouring classes of India! I bow to you.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 358-359*)

‘They have worked so long uniformly like machines guided by human intelligence, and the clever educated section have taken the substantial part of the fruits of their labour. In every country this has been the case. But times have changed. The lower classes are gradually awakening to this fact and making a united front against this, determined to exact their legitimate dues. The masses of Europe and America have been the first to awaken and have already begun the fight. Signs of this awakening have shown themselves in India, too, as is evident from the number of strikes among the lower classes nowadays. The upper classes will no longer be able to repress the lower, try they ever so much. The well-being of the higher classes now lies in helping the lower to get their legitimate rights. (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 148-149*)

In the emerging environment of over-mechanization, automation, and super-specialization of skills, Swami Vivekananda observed, the working class has to be in a constant threat of losing their employment:

‘The men in factories are doing the same monotonous work, day after day, night after night, year after year, each batch of men doing one special bit of work – such as fashioning the heads of pins, or uniting the ends of threads, or moving backwards or forwards with the loom – for a whole life. And the result is that the loss of that special job means death to them – they find no other means of living and starve.’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 317*)

Let us listen to Sister Nivedita once more, in the context of economic liberalization and globalization pursued by the governments all over the world today. Here she brilliantly presents to posterity Vivekananda’s vision of the impending change:

‘Vivekananda’s passion of pity, however, did not concern itself with the Indian people only. True to his Oriental birth, he would always defend the *small* farmer, or the *small* distributor, against those theorists who seem to consider that aggregations of business are justified in proportion to their size. He held that the age of humanity now dawning would occupy itself mainly with the problems of the working-folk, or as he expressed it, with the problems of the Sudra. When he first landed in the West, he was greatly attracted, as his letters show, by the apparent democracy of conditions there. Later in 1900, he had a clearer view of the underlying selfishness of capital and the struggle for privilege, and confided to someone that Western life now looked to him “like hell”.... Yet he never doubted that for man, the world over, the coming age would be “for the People”. “We are to solve the problems of the Sudra,” he said, one day, “but oh, through what tumults! Through what tumults!” ’ (*The Master As I Saw Him, Sixth Edition, p. 302-303*)

Economic liberalization and globalization: For the people?

In this age of economic globalization, ‘the underlying selfishness of capital and the struggle for privilege’ are global. Stronger nations want to take out money from weaker nations. The rich is becoming richer, widening the gulf between the rich and the poor, creating social tension. Human Development Report 2005 states, ‘the richest 20% of the population hold three-quarters of world income... the poorest 20% hold just 1.5%.’ Several UN and ILO reports show that the increase in employment is not commensurate with investment of money, and that the number of the unemployed is rising. Some important experts of economics have warned against this sort of globalization. The 2004 report of the World Commission on The Social Dimension of Globalization, set up by the ILO in 2002,

strongly criticized it. One of the members of the Commission, Prof Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University, who got the Nobel Prize in economics in 2001, came to Calcutta recently. He gave a talk at the West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences. He spoke of the risk of poorly designed structural reforms, in which the people has no voice and due to which they are suffering. He said that the trickle-down theory, that assures people that they will also have some of its benefits trickling down from the above, is wrong. There is hardly any trickle down in the present methods of globalization. He also criticized trade and capital market liberalization. He clearly said that the results of such globalization are poverty, inequality, financial instability, and huge indebtedness. If we compare these analyses with Swami Vivekananda's, we cannot but conclude that he was much ahead of his time and really belonged to the future. He is more relevant today than a century back.

On management at the micro-level

Let us also touch upon the management of organizations in the context of industries. The Vedanta, as explained by Swami Vivekananda, has the potential of revolutionizing management practices and industrial relations, to make things more and more equitable and humane. Without going into details, we may only mention here that many management experts in India have already recognized this and that some changes have already started to come in management studies. Take, for instance, the emphasis on the heart – a feeling heart. Previously in industries the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) used to be tested for selection of employees. Now experts give more importance to the Emotional Quotient (EQ). The emotions, the feelings, of a man must be expanded, balanced, and controlled to make him fit for work, especially for leading others in any situation. The modern ideas of Organizational Behaviour and HR can have a basis and explanation in the Vedanta alone.

Global warming

We have not so far tried to seriously manage the impact of industrialization on our natural environment. Global warming due to environmental pollution started with industrial revolution and accelerated with the expansion of industries. It has become acute in this age of economic globalization and is bringing human civilization to the brink of ruin. This has been confirmed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Even before the process started to give the slightest indication, Swami Vivekananda observed with a common sense approach:

‘Armed with the old fashioned unusually long-barrelled musket –which has to be supported on a two-legged wooden stand while firing, and ignited by actually setting fire and blowing into it – the Barakhjais and the Afridis can fire with unerring precision, while the modern trained soldier with the highly complex machine-guns of the present day fires 150 rounds in a minute and *serves merely to heat the atmosphere! Machinery in a small proportion is good...*’ (*Complete Works, Vol. 7, p. 317*)
[Emphasis added]

Conclusion

So, here are some ideas of Swami Vivekananda about industrialization. Let us all study Swami Vivekananda deeply, not taking him merely as a propagator of religious and philosophical ideas. He was a man of the people, with a scientific temper and pragmatic views. And he lived for the good of all. Let us take the important ideas from him without hesitation and apply them to make India truly prosperous.

Now India is progressing well in research in various fields of science and engineering. There has been considerable advancement in the new fields of nuclear technology, biotechnology, nano-technology, and so on. But there is another engineering, to which we do not pay much attention – *human engineering*. We do not think of making proper men. With extremely selfish and shortsighted people in charge, nothing can save us from ruin. So, let us first make unselfish men with sharp intellect and practical efficiency. That is the call of Swami Vivekananda. If we pay a little heed to his teachings and make use this human engineering, we shall become really prosperous and India will regain her high status in the world.