

## **EXAMINING KARMA YOGA AS THE BASIS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S NATIONALISTIC DISCOURSES**

Soumya Narayan Datta

Guest lecturer, Department of Sociology  
Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah, West Bengal

### **ABSTRACT**

Swami Vivekananda's spirit of nationalism reached the zenith of excellence after his heroic return from the west. It assumed the shape of wild fire and influenced the mass as magic spell. He gave a clarion call to the nation which had been debased to political serfdom and economic stagnation that suddenly realized that it had not to bend its head down in shame, inferiority and defeatism but that it could hold up its head in legitimate pride and absolute confidence. He kindled a new zeal and fervour for struggle for freedom in every corner of india. According to Vivekananda, Indian nationalism is divine in inspiration and spirit although he talked of Hindu nationalism. In highlighting the divine aspect of our national life he said ... "there is not one race on this earth to which the world owes so much as to the patient Hindu, the mild Hindu. He described Karma Yoga as a mental discipline that allows a person to carry out his or her duties as a service to the entire world and also as a path to enlightenment. The present paper would give a deeper reflection on karma yoga as the basis of nationalism of Swami Vivekananda.

**Keywords:** nationalism, personality, divine, philosophy, karma yoga

### **INFLUENCES THAT SHAPED SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S PHILOSOPHY**

The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses. He had also a realization that at least some of the social evils were due to the orthodoxy and superstitions prevalent in the society of the time. He had a deep conviction that this was due to a loss of faith in spiritual values. Consequently, he aimed at, what could be called a spiritual awakening and accepted with gratitude whatever he could learn from faiths and disciplines emphasizing the ultimacy of spiritual values. The deepest influence upon his thought is obviously of ancient Hindu philosophy especially of the Vedanta. It can safely be said that to a very great extent, Vivekananda is also a Vedantist. In a certain sense, Vivekananda is influenced by Buddhist philosophy also. There are at least three ideas in

Vivekananda's philosophy for which he remains indebted to Buddhist thought. The first and foremost is the idea of mass liberation that Vivekananda envisages; it has a clear similarity with the Buddhist ideal of Bodhisattva. Secondly, Vivekananda is impressed by the Buddhist assertion that the raft with the help of which one crosses a river in storm, should be left for the use of others. Buddha himself, even after attaining Nirvana, kept on roaming about and helping others in their struggles against suffering. Vivekananda frankly recognizes the worth of such humanitarian and altruistic work. His own missionary zeal for service is influenced by this. Thirdly, some of the Buddhist ideals like Samyak Karmanta and Ajitva have also inspired Vivekananda a great deal (Lal, 1978).

Lal (1978) stated that along with these Indian influences he also carried on his thought with the influence of Christianity. He was impressed by the strength of character, the soul-force that the man of the Cross possessed. He could see that it required a supreme spiritual strength to forgive the oppressor even in the midst of acute physical suffering. From Christianity, therefore, Vivekananda takes up the ideal of service and love. But the profoundest influence, in the light of which every other influence was remodelled and shaped, was that of his master, Ramakrishna Paramahansa. It is said that Ramakrishna brought about a spiritual transformation in the personality and the mental make-up of Vivekananda.

### **EMERGENCE OF THE NATIONALISTIC PERSONALITY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**

Though Swami Vivekananda did not propound any theory of nationalism like a political scientist, nationalism was his very creed. Love for his motherland was in his very blood though he breathed the air of spiritualism. This led sister Nivedita to remark bettingly that, "Just as Ramkrishna in fact, without knowing any books had been a living epitome of the Vedanta so was Vivekananda of the National life. But of the theory of this he was unconscious. Underneath his spiritualism, there vibrates a strong current of nationalism that developed gradually and reached the high watermark when he returned triumphantly to India after his historic mission in the West and made a whirlwind tour through India. Swami Vivekananda's idea of nationalism fully manifested itself in the lectures he delivered in reply to the addresses of welcome that were presented to him on his return to India, when he travelled from Colombo to Almora and Punjab to Kashmir. These lectures are the "perennial source of patriotic inspiration scintillating with the greatest spiritual ideal of the nation. These lectures are really unique in respect of the fact that they are only lectures, Swami Vivekananda delivered on Indian soil, while all the rest, dealing with various aspects of Vedanta, were delivered from world platforms in America and England. Therefore it is in these lectures that we come across Vivekananda's nationalistic fervour and realize the way in which his spiritual ideology shaped his nationalistic zeal. These lectures show

how Swami Vivekananda was convinced that emancipation of the masses and the removal of their misery and suffering were impossible without the attainment of freedom and nationhood by India. Hence his spiritual philosophy had a deeply nationalistic dimension (Bhuyan, 2003).

Bhuyan (2003) also pointed that according to Swami Vivekananda, Indian nationalism is divine in inspiration and spirit although he talked of Hindu nationalism. In highlighting the divine aspect of our national life he said, "... there is not one race on this earth to which the world owes so much as to the patient Hindu, the mild Hindu. 'The mild Hindu' sometimes is used as an expression of reproach but if ever a reproach concealed a wonderful truth, it is in the term 'the mild Hindu' who has always been the blessed child of God. However, Swami Vivekananda meant by Hindu something different from what is normally meant by Hindu people of a particular religious persuasion. In his subsequent speeches Swami Vivekananda exhorted Indians to recollect their spiritual heritage and not to condemn their social and cultural past and not take to a life of imitation of the West. India has a glorious heritage. In religion and philosophy it had been the teacher of the world all through the ages. Even today India has retained her genius in this respect. Revival of spirituality has always been the prelude to the revival of culture and political life in India. For, "Spirituality is the soul of India. Its enhancement has always been the sure way to greatness and its erosion, the way to national suicide." From his study of the world history Swami Vivekananda expounded a theory regarding the survival of the nations and he applied it to explain the cause of India's survival in spite of all the disasters that threatened to destroy it. He said that human history shows that every nation has to make a contribution of its own in a chosen field for the general advancement of humanity and that when it ceases to do so it decays and dies. "Nature effaces it off to make way for more vigorous and younger races to take up the role. It is a natural practice to get rid of an atrophied part of an organism and let others to take up its function. There had been great nations in the past- the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek and the Romans etc., whose civilization were contemporaneous with that of India but they have all disappeared from the face of the earth and the regions where they flourished are occupied by people whose culture and national history have no continuity with those of these ancient people. The reason for it, according to Swami Vivekananda is the fact that they ceased to fulfil their national purpose which were mostly political, social, military etc. After short periods of national life they lost their hold on the national theme which made them great and this led to their gradual decay and ultimate destruction at the hands of the more vigorous people. Swami Vivekananda warned the Indians to steer their nationalship very carefully between the two sources of dangers—the Scylla of Western materialism and the charybdis of Eastern obscurantism. Spirituality is the cultivation of the great ideals taught in the Gita and Upanishads in such a way that they are reflected in our individual and national life. The practice of village customs, caste rules, don't-touchism, irrational usages in eating and drinking have nothing to do with spirituality. They do not represent the eternal values. Too much insistence on

these eternal to the detriment of real and eternal spiritual principles expounded in the Gita and the Upanishads had been the main baneful influence that had vitiated the life of the people. When Vivekananda exhorted the people to retain their hold on our spiritual ideals he did not ask them to relapse into this nightmare of social and religious obscurantism, but to be forward looking and to go ahead without forgetting the great teachings of the Gita and Upanishads. To quote Sister Nivedita, "To his mind Hinduism was not to remain a stationary system, but to prove herself capable of embracing and welcoming the whole modern development. Vivekananda popularized the concept of freedom among the people. However, he identified political freedom, with spiritual freedom. He said that political freedom precedes spiritual freedom. He was a devout worshipper at the shrine of individual freedom. He declared, "Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, growth and well being; where it does not exist the man, the race and the nation must go down; any clan or caste or nation or institution which bars the power of free thought and action of an individual, so long as it does not injure other, is devilish and must go down. It has been observed, "Swami Vivekananda's heroic soul always yearned for freedom. Although primarily, he taught the concept of spiritual freedom, this gospel was bound to result in the popularization of other aspects of freedom, including the political freedom as well. Along with individual freedom Swami Vivekananda also stressed the need of equality of all men. To him inequality stands as the greatest bar for the promotion of brotherhood among all men. So he voiced his great concern against social, political and economic inequalities that shatter the unity of human society. Swami Vivekananda asked his countrymen to be bold and fearless and not to yield to weakness of any sort. To him weakness is the bitterest enemy of man. This weakness can be overcome by the cultivation of strength and not by brooding over weakness. Since man is the son of God which is the spark of Absolute Brahma, the source of all strength and power, he can never be weak. It is only delusion that makes him weak. This false fear will vanish if we put our faith in Upanishads. Vedanta is the source of all strength, the storehouse of all power. "If there is one word that you find coming like a bomb from the Upanishads, bursting like a bombshell upon mass of ignorance, it is the word, fearlessness." If a man shakes off his fear and awakes to his height he can come to know himself and his enormous strength. Weakness leads to misery. It is the cause of slavery and suffering. As he said, "Strength is life, weakness is death. Strength is felicity, life is eternal, immortal. Weakness is constant strain and misery, weakness is death. He further said that unless every Indian puts up courage and fearlessness, India cannot achieve any success. Success comes to acting and daring man. Courage, confidence and will power is the only key to success and man has a world of success to achieve. Swami Vivekananda encouraged the Indians in the midst of all national hazards and hurdles and asked them not to be disheartened. He infused new hopes and aspirations into the hearts of his countrymen by saying, "It is same India, which has withstood the shocks of centuries of hundreds of foreign invasions, of hundreds of upheavals of manners and customs. It

is the same land which stands firmer than any rock in the world with its undying vigour, indestructible life. Its life is of the same nature as the soul without beginning and without end, immortal and we are the children of such a country.” The problems of our country according to Swami Vivekananda are more complicated than those of any other country. “Here there are people of diverse races, speaking different language, following manners and customs of utmost diversity. The only common ground that we have, according to Swami Vivekananda, is our sound traditions-our religion. There must be therefore, the recognition of one religion through the length and breadth of the country. People must be aware of those common grounds in the first place. All these diversity of race, religion and manners would melt away before the unifying power of religion. Unification of religion, therefore, is the initial step for the building up of future of Indian nation. In Europe political ideas form the basis of national unity. In Asia religious ideals form the basis of national unity. The unity in religion, therefore, is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India.” To Swami Vivekananda this unity of religion is not a very difficult job. It is rather very easy if the people would be able to understand the true end of religion. Whatever may be the religion, its ultimate end is to lead man to salvation. The aim of Swami Vivekananda was to build up a new progressive India out of the debris of superstitions and ignorance that enveloped her. Unless the masses are free from the encircling gloom of ignorance they cannot discern the new light of life in the horizon. Education is the light that dispels the gloom far off and makes life conducive to novelty and newness of thought. It inculcates new strength of character among the people and induces one to be strong and self-reliant.” We want that education by which character is formed, strengthen of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one’s own feet. Swami Vivekananda not only travelled abroad and delivered stirring speeches to make the Indian masses arise and awake to achieve the nationalistic goal, he also organized the Ramkrishna Mission, which would carry out his plan of action and uplift his country and help in the act of nation-building. He first established two principal centres-one near Calcutta and another at Mayabati near Almora, where youngmen, who joined the Ramkrishna Mission were trained as sannyasins (Renouncers of the worldly life) for religion and social welfare work. Thus an ancient and venerable institution came to be utilized for national service. The monks of the mission lived a life of dedication, engaging themselves in active service of the society and alleviating the suffering of the downtrodden.

### **AN INSIGHT ON KARMA YOGA AS THE BASIS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S NATIONALISTIC DISCOURSES**

Swami Vivekananda, although a sannyasin, was a firm believer in Karmayoga and expected that Indian nationalism should be based upon Karmayoga. This Karmayoga which has been elaborately dealt with in the II and III chapter of the Bhagvad Gita is a special attraction.

Therefore Bal Gangadhar Tilak aptly observed, “The principal subject matter of the Gita, is the exposition of the Karmayoga.” Karma or action is considered the supreme need of life. Life cannot be conceived of without action. Explaining this Karmayoga, Dr. Radhakrishnan says, “So long as we lead embodied lives, we cannot escape from action. Without work life cannot be sustained.” By the very nature of things one cannot remain actionless even for a moment. It is the very innate nature of man. As the Bhagvad Gita says, “No one can remain even for a moment without doing work; Everyone is made to act helplessly by the impulses born of nature.” Accordingly Swami Vivekananda has said, “Intense activity is necessary; we must always work. We cannot live a minute without work.” Even saints and sannyasins are not exempted from the obligation of work. Even God, who is the source of the universe from whom the entire creation proceeds is not free from such obligation. As Lord Krishna says to Arjuna,

“Look at me!-

Thou son of Pritha in the three wide worlds,

I am not bound to any toil, no height

Awaits to scale, no gift remains to gain,

Yet, I act here.”

Besides, God by His incessant activity and action also preserves the world and prevents it from being ruined. As Lord Krishna again says to Arjuna, “If I should cease to work, these worlds would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people.” Hence, to Swami Vivekananda, Karma or action is the root of all existence - from individual to universe.

Life is a ‘Karma Bhumi’ . Karma or action is the religion of man. It is the only way to reach the goal of life i.e. ‘freedom’. As Swami Vivekananda said, “Our goal is freedom ..... and that goal is to be reached through works.” But Karmayoga provides the clues to such works. It lays down the process, the way, the mode and the manner of performing the works that lead to freedom. As it has been observed, “It is the secret of work, the method of work, the organizing power of work. A vast mass of energy may be spent in vain if we do not know how to utilise it. Karmayoga makes a science of work; we learn by it how best to utilise all the workings of the world.” Hence, to Swami Vivekananda, “Karmayoga is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and through good works.” Karmayoga, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not only to be practised in individual life; it is to be sincerely practised at national level also. As he has said, “In whatever you do, for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude-expect nothing in return. Therefore Swami Vivekananda’s mission was to enlighten and inspire the people of India and the mankind as a whole, with the ideals of Karmayoga that provides a cogent basis to his theory of nationalism. Explaining Karmayoga,

Swami Vivekananda said that every man is the architect of his own destiny. Others cannot make him happy unless he tries to make himself so. It has been said, "As long as we require someone else to make us happy, we are slaves. So dependence on others is nothing but a sort of slavery. By dint of karma one makes himself happy and prosperous. Without karma life is bound to suffer. It is only out of ignorance that we blame others or our fate for such suffering." As said Swami Vivekananda, "We reap what we sow. We are the makers of our own fate. None else has the blame, none has the praise. The wind is blowing ; those vessels, whose sails are unfurled catch it and go forward on their way, but those which have their sails furled, do not catch the wind. Is that the fault of the wind? Swami Vivekananda, whose love for the starved and the down-trodden was very great, tried with all sincerity to arouse the spirit of unremitting toil or activity or karma among man. To him karma is the only passport to human happiness. It alone can mitigate our misery and sufferings. He exhorted his country-men, "...stand up, behold be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourselves." Again, he exhorted, "This world is a great gymnasium, where we come to make ourselves strong." To Swami Vivekananda, 'Work is worship', 'Duty is God'. Duty of any kind is not to be slighted. It has been pointed out, "The man who does what is considered a lower work, is not, for that reason alone, a lower man than he who does what is considered a higher work." It has been further pointed out, "Even the lowest form of work is not to be despised." Hence, a man is not to be judged by the nature of his duties but by the manner in which he does them or the purpose for which he does them whether they conform to the ideals of Karmayoga or not. But every duty is holy and devotion to duty is the highest form of worship to God. It is certainly a source of great help in enlightening and emancipating the deluded and ignorance-encumbered souls, the bound ones. It is sincerity and devotion to duty that brings success in life. There must be coordination and consistency between word and action of every man. Man should not be platform-hero, he must be a hero of action. He must have leonine vigour in the practical field. As it is said, "The great leaders of mankind belong to higher fields than the fields of platform works." There are two types of works - good works and bad works. Man. should abstain from bad works though he feels tempted to perform it. Since he is the manifestation of divinity, he should involve himself only in those works which will provide a positive push to his soul for higher development. Such works, though initially discouraging should be taken up with a strong conviction that God is there to help. As said Swami Vivekananda, "...you must always remember that each word, thought and deed lays upon a store for you and that as the bad thought and bad works are ready to spring upon you like tigers, so also there is inspiring hope that the good thoughts and good deeds are ready with the power of a hundred thousand angels to defend you always and forever." Non-attachment is the essential hallmark of 'Karmayoga'. It implies that every man should work for work's sake. He should not be deluded by any attachment to work. This attachment comes

from expectation of a reward or fruit. As Swami Vivekananda has said, "Attachment comes only where we expect a return." This expectation of reward that begets attachment encumbers the soul. Swami Vivekananda realised the truth of the version of the Gita, "Man has right to work but not to aspire for any result." In the light of this version he held that man should leave all result to God, but he should do his work with utmost sincerity and devotion. As he said: "Work unceasingly but refuse to have any attachment to work." As he further said, "The only true duty is to be unattached and to work as free beings, to give up all work unto God. All duties are His." To Swami Vivekananda, "Non-attachment is perfect self-abnegation and utter unselfishness." Works must be performed with a spirit of sacrifice or service for the community. The Bhagvad Gita says that those who enjoy the fruits of action without sacrifice or service to the community are thieves. They commit violence against the Divine and their acts become the acts, tainted in sin. Hence, the Bhagvad Gita emphasises on the actions for the service of God or for the welfare of His creation, but not actions with the ultimate objective of self-aggrandisement. That is why Annie Besant in the preface of her Gita has remarked, "Teachings of the Gita lift man from lower level to the loftier heights, where desires are dead; it can be a practical guide to action" (Bhuyan, 2003).

According to Bhuyan (2003), Swami Vivekananda says that one of the special characteristics of the Bhagvad Gita is its emphasis on "Niskamakarma" or "Work without desire or attachment." He understood the message of the Gita, "Work constantly; work but be not attached; be not caught. Reserve unto yourself the power of detaching yourself from everything, however beloved, however much the soul might yearn for it, however great the pang of misery you feel, if you are going to leave it; still reserve the power of leaving it whenever you want." But Swami Vivekananda, a great believer in Man-God, thought the poor, the down-trodden to be the real living Gods. As he said, "The only God who exists, the only God in whom I believe ...my God, are the unfortunates, the poor of all nations." Therefore he went further to say that the essence of this "Niskamakarma" or work without attachment is love, sympathy and service to the whole world. As he said, "The true "Niskamakarma" is neither to be like a brute nor to be inert nor heartless...His heart is so full of love and sympathy that he can embrace the whole world with his love. The world at large cannot generally comprehend his all embracing love and sympathy." Hence, according to Swami Vivekananda Karmayoga provides tremendous impetus to universalism and cosmopolitanism. Sincere pursuit of Karmayoga at national and international level will accelerate the process of achieving the goal of universal brotherhood, peace and progress of perennial nature. Man lives through action. Action prepares his path for Moksha or salvation. But all sorts of work cannot lead man to Moksha or salvation. Only the Niskamakarma or work without attachment entitles him to salvation. The Gita gives the most lucid interpretation of the doctrine of Niskamakarma and lays down that man should not be guided by any motive-motive for money, power or reputation. Swami Vivekananda also said, "He works best who

works without any motive neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world.” Most of the people nowadays think that working without any motive means not to be affected by any pleasure or pain but this is not true. As said Swami Vivekananda, "If that were its real meaning then heartless brutes and the walls would be the best exponents of the performance of the 'Niskamakarma'. It will make man stony-hearted and the worst criminals will have to be considered saints. What the Gita has taught us is work with the intention of attainment of higherself and forgetfulness of lowerself. This is the meaning of working through yoga. There are many functions of the body that we perform subconsciously and many other consciously. So also there can be work with the mind, immersed in samadhi, eliminating the smaller ego. This is what happens to some extent when a painter or an artist performs his best. His lower ego is kept in obedience. So while explaining Karmayoga Swami Vivekananda said, "Let your soul remain free...Do not bring egoism in to it, I...My..." The Gita further teaches that he who is one with the Lord through yoga performs all his works immersed in concentration and not looking for any personal self or personal benefit. Such works really brings good to the world. The whole mankind is benefited by it. Personal interest is not sought. Common interest or common good is the basis of such work. Individual interest is identified with common interest. As it has been said, "It is only work that is done as a free will offering to humanity and Nature that does not bring with it any binding attachment." The Bhagvad Gita, according to Swami Vivekananda teaches that we must do those works only which will exalt and ennoble us in accordance with the ideals and activities of the society in which we are born. But we must remember that same ideals and activities do not prevail in all societies and nations. There are different societies and different nations. They have different customs and different activities. So we should not judge others on the basis of our own and conceive any prejudice against others. In most cases, according to Swami Vivekananda, this ignorance is the main cause of much of the hatred of one nation towards another. As he has said, "An American thinks that whatever an American does in accordance with the custom of his country, is the best thing to do, and that whoever does not follow his custom must be a very wicked man. A Hindu thinks that his customs are the only right ones and are the best in the world and that whosoever does not obey them must be the most wicked man living. This is quite a natural mistake, which all of us are apt to make. But it is very harmful.. Much of the oppression of powerful nations on weaker ones is caused by this prejudice. It dries up their fellow-feeling for fellowmen." Therefore we ought to always remember that we should always try to see the duty of others through their own eyes and never judge the customs of other peoples by our own standard. We should know that we are not the standard of the universe. We have to accommodate ourselves to the world and not the world to us. We must also know that environment changes the nature of duty in different societies and nations. Besides, we must judge others not by the nature of their work but by the manner and

spirit in which they perform - whether in an unselfish manner and in a spirit of sacrifice or not. As Swami Vivekananda has observed, "Man is not to be judged by the mere nature of his duties but all should be judged by the manner and the spirit in which they perform them."

Hence according to Swami Vivekananda, Karmayoga provides an international ethics for a sound international behaviour and relation. Swami Vivekananda says that all works are covered by some evils always like fire by smoke. We should therefore do such work as brings the largest amount of good and the smallest measure of evil to the people. To explain his point he said, "Arjuna had to kill Bhishma, Drona and Kama etc. in the battle field of Kurukshetra. If he had not done that the country would have been usurped by a body of proud and unrighteous kings to the greatest misfortune of the mankind." Hence those who do not work for their personal interest are not affected by any evil, for they work for the good of the world. This motiveless works bring the highest bliss and freedom to the individual, to the nation and to the mankind as a whole (Bhuyan, 2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

Swami Vivekananda was a firm believer in Karmayoga. He stated that "Karmayoga is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and through good works." Karmayoga, according to Swami Vivekananda, is not only to be practised in individual life; it is to be sincerely practised at national level also. Swami Vivekananda's mission was to enlighten and inspire the people of India and the mankind as a whole, with the ideals of Karmayoga that provides a cogent basis to his theory of nationalism. Explaining Karmayoga, Swami Vivekananda said that every man is the architect of his own destiny. Others cannot make him happy unless he tries to make himself so. Swami Vivekananda, whose love for the starved and the down-trodden was very great, tried with all sincerity to arouse the spirit of unremitting toil or activity or karma among man. To him karma is the only passport to human happiness. It alone can mitigate our misery and sufferings. To Swami Vivekananda, 'Work is worship', 'Duty is God'. Swami Vivekananda has stated that attachment towards work comes only where there is an expectation for a return." This expectation of reward begets attachment and encumbers the soul. Thus the essential hallmark of Karma Yoga is non-attachment that implies that every man should work for work's sake. He also expressed the fact that all works are covered by some evils always like fire by smoke. It means that those who do not work for their personal interest work for the good or the sake of the world and in this way no such evil can affect people's daily work process.

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