

# Swami Vivekananda's Spiritual Vision of Economics: an Overview

Dr. Ajay Bhardwaj

Sr. Asst. Professor, Dept. of Communication, DSVV, Haridwar, India

## Abstract

Economic ideas have been there since time immemorial. It traces the story of trials and tribulations of human beings in entailing the effort to fulfill their satisfaction. All these stories are succinctly presented in the history of economic thought which provides the historical survey of the origin and development of economic ideas. Thoughts of every age in the context of their surroundings have governed individual actions and policies and are, therefore, important for us. Thinking is the heritage of man. Swami Vivekananda's vision of economics was concerned with the wholesome development of all categories of people in the country. His priority was the removal of poverty and uplifting the poorer and downtrodden sections of the society. He stressed the holistic development of the individual and the nation. He wanted all sections of the country to progress. His emphasize was on the weaker sections and women. He underlined that education and basic facilities be provided to all. He strongly lays emphasis on developed methods of agriculture, village industries, adoption of science and technology and material prosperity with spirituality which seems to be very relevant even today.

**Key words:** Economic ideas, Poverty, Material prosperity, Agriculture, Industries, Spirituality

**Article Received: 01-08-2016, Published: 30-08-2016**

**Conflict of interest:** None declared

**\*Corresponding Author:**

Dr. Ajay Bhardwaj, Sr. Asst. Professor, Dept. of Communication, DSVV, Haridwar, India

Email: [dsvvajay@gmail.com](mailto:dsvvajay@gmail.com)

**International Journal of Science and Consciousness (IJSC): a Bio-Psycho-Spiritual approach  
Published by the Research Foundation for Science & Consciousness, Uttarakhand, India**

## Swami Vivekananda's Spiritual Vision of Economics: an Overview

### Introduction

It was Swami Vivekananda, the beloved disciple of Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and the valiant monk who proclaimed in America the greatness of Hinduism and of Indian culture at a time when the West regarded India as a land of barbarians. He was the living embodiment of sacrifice and dedicated his life to the country and yearned for the progress of the poor, the helpless and the downtrodden. He was the great thinker and mighty man of action whose ringing words galvanized the slumbering Indians. For ages to come he will be a source of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> During his travels all over India, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses. He was the first religious leader in India to understand and openly declare that the real cause of India's downfall was the neglect of the masses. Immediate need was to provide food and other bare necessities of life to the hungry millions. For this they should be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc. It was in this context that Vivekananda grasped the crux of the problem of poverty in India (which had escaped the attention of social reformers of his days): owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lot. It was first of all necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. For this they needed a life-giving, inspiring message. Swamiji found this message in the principle of the Atman, the doctrine of the potential divinity of the soul, taught in Vedanta, the ancient system of religious philosophy of India. He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion, but they had never been taught the life-giving, ennobling principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life. Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: secular knowledge to improve their economic condition and spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their moral sense. The next question was, how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses? Through

education – this was the answer that Swamiji found.<sup>2</sup>

It is well known that the Swami was eager to solve the bread-problem of his countrymen. He said again and again that one cannot practice religion with an empty stomach. There must be food, nourishing food. The wants of the body must be fulfilled. Then only we can devote our mind to higher things. He considered that much of our present degradation, not merely material, was due to our physical weakness.<sup>3</sup> In course of a lecture at Madras, he said: "Physical weakness is the cause at least of one-third of our miseries. We are lazy; we cannot work; we cannot combine; we do not love each other; we are intensely selfish; not three of us can come together without hating each other, without being jealous of each other. That is the state in which we are, hopelessly disorganized mobs, immensely selfish, fighting each other for centuries as to whether a certain mark is to be put on our forehead this way or that way; writing volumes and volumes upon such momentous questions as to whether the look of a man spoils my food or not! This we have been doing for the last few centuries. We cannot expect anything high from a race whose whole brain-energy has been occupied in such wonderfully beautiful problems and researches! And are we not ashamed of ourselves? Aye, sometimes we are, but though we think these things frivolous, we cannot give them up. We think many things and never do them; parrot-like, thinking has become a habit with us, and never doing. What is the cause of that? Physical weakness. This sort of weak brain is not able to do anything; we must strengthen it. First of all, our young men must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. Be strong, my young friends; this is my advice to you... You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman, when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men."<sup>4</sup>

## Economic Views of Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda is a great visionary, with a rare clarity on diverse aspects of human life. His intimate knowledge of the Indian situation, wide experience across different countries, deep understanding of the civilizational backgrounds and keen intellect gave him a unique opportunity to develop new insights on different subjects, including economics.

The Indian economy was at its worst period during the times of Swamiji. Dadabhai Naoroji calculated that the national income of India during 1867-68 was 3.4 billion rupees for a population of 170 million, with a per capita income of just 20 rupees<sup>5</sup>. Comparison of per capita incomes of different countries revealed that India's income was very low; 'even the most oppressed and mis-governed Russia' was much better and it was believed that India was 'the poorest country in the civilized world.'<sup>6</sup>

The European domination had made India, the nation with a long history of prosperity and superior achievements, a poor country. The agricultural, industrial and business sectors were destroyed. The replacement of the native education with the Macaulay system resulted in changing the entire course of education, apart from denying it to the larger sections of the society. The value based systems that governed the functioning of the society and economy since the ancient times suffered severe damages.

He felt that once the minds of the poor were liberated they would be able to resist the tyranny of foreign powers which was responsible for their poverty. I agree with Swamiji. Economic exploitation and mental slavery are the twin pillars on which poverty thrives. A mentally agile people are more likely to rise and resist economic exploitation and stop the country's wealth being indiscriminately exported. Swamiji recognizes the fact of India's wealth being exported: "India is restless with the thought of how to face this specter 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". Swamiji recognizes that economic exploitation by the British was the root cause of India's poverty. But, at the same time, he puts greater importance on the self-deprecation of the common man of India.<sup>7</sup> Swami Vivekananda acquired a deep understanding of the Indian economy due to his first-hand knowledge of the issues as an itinerant monk covering different parts of the country. His experiences and interactions in the foreign countries provided him an opportunity to understand and compare the economic and social systems of different parts of the world.

He was worried that the western countries were getting rich with the Indian resources, while Indians remained unaware of the opportunities. He said: "In this country of abundance, the producer of which has been the cause of the spread of civilization in other countries, you are reduced to such straits! Your condition is even worse than that of a dog ..... 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."<sup>8</sup>

### His emphasis on Agriculture

Basically India is an agricultural country. As a true visionary, Swami Vivekananda was fully aware of the importance of agriculture and noted that "Indians must not shy off from their unique characteristic of being an agrarian economy"<sup>9</sup>. He wanted India to adopt modern scientific practices to improve agriculture. He was particular that the small farmers need to be encouraged.

His emphasis on agriculture remains true even in the present context, as about 60 per cent of the population still depends on agriculture and rural activities. We are witnessing as to how the neglect of agriculture after independence is

resulting in suicides and the younger generations leaving farming activities. This is not good for the future of the country. India has inherent strengths in agriculture, which the other countries lack. Besides, there is no other nation in the world that is capable of feeding our population, which is one sixth of humanity.<sup>10</sup>

### **His views on Industrialization**

The next point to determine is about the means of attaining material prosperity. Two ways are before us: the ancient way of small-scale industry; and the modern method of large-scale production. What has Swamiji to say about these means? Does he favor small-scale industrial method? Or the modern industrial method? One thing is very significant. We know that even in the days of the Swami, modern industrialism was in full swing. Small-scale method had been long supplanted by modern industrialism. And the evils of the modern system were also quite apparent, in fact more apparent in his days than now. In those days the labor movement was in an embryonic state. Labor legislations to ameliorate the conditions of workers had just begun. Now workers are much better treated in every country than in his days. Surely the Swami was not slow to observe them. If he had wanted that India should not have anything to do with modern industrialism, he would definitely have warned us against it and definitely asked us to adhere to our ancient methods. But he has not done so.<sup>11</sup>

It may be said that he did not like to go into details, and that is why he did not give us a clear warning. But this argument does not seem convincing. He analyzed Western civilization carefully. He made many pronouncements on it on various occasions. Surely his silence on this point must be explained differently. But, no, he was not completely silent on the evils of Western industrialism. He wrote on one occasion: "Machinery in a small proportion is good, but too much of it kills man's initiative and makes a lifeless machine of him. 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 and 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. Doing routine work like a machine, one becomes a lifeless machine. For that reason, one serving as a schoolmaster or a clerk for a whole life-time, ends by turning a stupendous fool."<sup>12</sup>

Is it that the Swami did not want that machines (large-scale) should be introduced in India and that we should ply with our ancient simple machines? We do not think we can legitimately infer this. It may be that though he was aware of the attendant evils of machinery, he yet felt that they cannot be avoided. For against the single condemnation of machinery produced above, we have many passages in the Swami's seven volumes of works, which testify that he wanted us to follow the West in our industrial reorganization. Let us quote: "You must learn the power of organization of the Europeans." "The Hindus have to learn a little bit of materialism from the West and teach them a little bit of spirituality." [Here the phrase "a little bit" should not be understood literally. For surely we are not to teach the West only a little bit of spirituality, but as much as possible. Similarly, we must also learn as much of materialism as possible and desirable.] "Have we to learn anything else, have we to learn anything from the world? We have, perhaps, to gain a little in material knowledge, in the power of organization, in the ability to handle powers, organizing powers, in bringing the best results out of the smallest of causes. This perhaps to a certain extent we may learn from the West... Yet, perhaps, some sort of materialism, toned down to our own requirements, would be a blessing to many of our brothers who are not yet ripe for the highest truths." We, therefore, infer that Swamiji was in favor of introducing the Western industrial methods in India.<sup>13</sup>

### **Stress on Material prosperity with Spirituality**

Swamiji was clear that material prosperity and spirituality had to go together. He recognized that India was a great mercantile civilization: "From time immemorial India has beaten all other countries in the point of fertility and commercial industries. Most people are ignorant of the extent to which the opulence of ancient countries like Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome depended on Indian commerce. Ayodhya and Lanka were not 'poor' cities. The spiritual discourse of Sage Vasistha in Ayodhya was given in an ambience of prosperity and strength. Swamiji wanted to rebuild this tradition of strong economy with strong spirituality. The grand cities of the Indus civilization bear witness to this statement. Thus he wanted to blend economic development with spiritual pursuits.<sup>14</sup> Swamiji proposed many new ideas in the field of economics at the global and the Indian levels. He emphasized the need for combining material prosperity with the spiritual values for the all-round development of people in different countries. When the western countries were accumulating wealth and involved in enjoying material pleasures, he told them clearly that it was necessary to imbibe higher principles for a meaningful life. The west is beginning to realize the meaning of his words only during the recent years, after suffering a lot. The western economic ideas revolve around the materialistic aspects only. The economic theories and models that they were advocating over the years are proving to be failures. It is only now that they have begun to understand that life is a complex process of which economics is only a part.

Swamiji's thoughts for the Indian economy encompass different areas that are crucial to the functioning of the economic system. He remains the one spiritual monk who emphasized the need for material progress of the society more than anyone else. This is the reason why he was called as 'father of modern materialism.'<sup>15</sup> He was not an arm-chair theorist, confined to standard sets of beliefs. His ideas cover diverse aspects necessary for the all-round development of different sections of people and the progress of the nation.

## Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda remains one of the most influential personalities of India and the modern world. Though vast changes have taken place in the country since the beginning of the twentieth century, his influence continues to increase over the years. In fact many of his thoughts appear to be more relevant today.

Swamiji proposed many new ideas in the field of economics at the global and the Indian levels. He emphasized the need for combining material prosperity with the spiritual values for the all-round development of people in different countries. When the western countries were accumulating wealth and involved in enjoying material pleasures, he told them clearly that it was necessary to imbibe higher principles for a meaningful life. The west is beginning to realize the meaning of his words only during the recent years, after suffering a lot.

The western economic ideas revolve around the materialistic aspects only. The economic theories and models that they were advocating over the years are proving to be failures. It is only now that they have begun to understand that life is a complex process of which economics is only a part. Swami Vivekananda underlined that India need to develop her own system for the development of the economy. He wanted India to progress based on our own strength and methods without imitating and depending on other countries.

Swami Vivekananda's vision of economics was concerned with the wholesome development of all categories of people in the country. He strongly advocated what the economists in the recent periods call as 'inclusive economics.' His priority was the removal of poverty and uplifting the poorer and downtrodden sections of the society. He wanted all sections of the country to progress. His emphasize was on the weaker sections and women. He underlined that education and basic facilities be provided to all. His economic views lays emphasis on developed

methods of agriculture, village industries, adoption of science and technology and material prosperity with spirituality which seems to be very relevant even today.

## References

1. <http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/vivekanand/>
2. <http://www.belurmath.org/swamivivekananda.htm>
3. <http://kanagasabapathi.blogspot.in/2013/11/swami-vivekanandas-ideas-on-economics.html>
4. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol.III Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Sept.1992, p.241-242,
5. Naoroji, Dadabhai, *Poverty and Un-British Rule India*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1996, p.II
6. Quoted in Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, Anamika Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 2004, p.17
7. <http://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2013/1/19/Swami-Vivekananda-s-approach-to-Indian-economy>.
8. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol.4, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Sept.1992, p.145
9. Swami Gamvirananda quoted in Ghosh, Sarup Prasad, *Swami Vivekananda's Economic Thought and in Modern International Perspective: India as a Case Study*, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkatta, 2010, p.53
10. Swami Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. VII, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Sept.1992, p.1828
11. <http://dharmalaw.blogspot.in/2009/09/economic-philosophy-of-swami.html>
12. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/PrabuddhaBharata/November\\_1930/The\\_Economic\\_Views\\_of\\_Swami\\_Vivekananda](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/PrabuddhaBharata/November_1930/The_Economic_Views_of_Swami_Vivekananda)
13. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/PrabuddhaBharata/November\\_1930/The\\_Economic\\_Views\\_of\\_Swami\\_Vivekananda](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/PrabuddhaBharata/November_1930/The_Economic_Views_of_Swami_Vivekananda)
14. <http://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2013/1/19/Swami-Vivekananda-s-approach-to-Indian-economy>.
15. Binoy Kumar Sarkar quoted in Santwana Dasgupta, *Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkatta, p.459

**Cite this paper as:** Bhardwaj, A. (2016). Swami Vivekananda's Spiritual Vision of Economics: an Overview. *International Journal of Science and Consciousness*; 2(3): 21-26.