

## The Discourse of Reason: Indian *Bhakti* Movement and German Enlightenment

**Jivendu Prasad Karna**

At a time when reason itself has been put into question by post modernists, it is worth studying as regards what sort of values and assumptions of values have been envisaged by German Enlightenment as well as what changes it has been able to bring about in man's status vis-à-vis his surroundings and society which furthermore might have played a role in changing the various cultural, social and political institutions and redefining, reforming and reconstructing the various age old structures in society.

Thereby it has to be understood that reason at the time of its advent functioning as a sole measure to understand an event initially strived to free the society from static-hierarchical order of social structures as well as also from heavenly or godly determined and ordained institutions and structures and so called natural norms of religion, superstitions, mysticism etc. at various levels and secondly it also took upon a task to create space for interplay of subject and its self determination. But it has to be enumerated as to which strata of society has been helped with this setting free of subject and also whether it has been able to bring freedom to all subjects to the extent that they can choose and use their self determined options and above all whether it has facilitated the whole mankind to avail themselves of their self-proclaimed space to play their various roles, which was really directed at. This question has been studied here from the perspective of Indian Vivek tradition in general and from Bhakti Movement in the middle age in India in particular as well as from Kantian perspective.

In India, the discourse of reason takes a different course of development than from the Occident where it developed in the course of history of one after another intellectual movement and discourses particularly from Renaissance to Enlightenment. Quite different from ritualistic edicts of Brahmanism it derives its vision and guidance from Lokayata Tradition. Lokayata Tradition means - .....What has come from folk or masses. Although the propounders and followers of this stream of thought were incisively criticized by the followers of Brahmanical order, they kept on professing their anti-theological views. Jawaharlal Nehru has clearly expressed this tension in his book "*Discovery of India*":-

"The materialists attacked authority and all vested interests in Thought religion and theology. They denounced the Vedas and Priest and traditional beliefs and proclaimed that belief must be free and must not depend on the authority of the past. They inveighed against all forms of magic and superstition. Their general spirit was comparable in many ways to the modern materialistic approach, it wanted to rid itself of the chains and burden of the past, of speculation about matters which could not be perceived or worship of imaginary gods....." (*Discovery of India*, p.97)

But propounders and propagators of Lokayata like Charvak could not sustain and continue for long. They were persecuted and brought to death by the followers of Brahmanism. But this reason based critical way of thinking against the blind belief and Brahmanical authority always remained engrained as undercurrent in the Indian Intellectual Thought Process and kept on appearing from time to time.

Ramvilas Sharma points to this tendency in his book "Mahavir Prasad Dwiwedi aur Hindi Navjagaran":

कबीर रहस्यवादी थे, किन्तु जिस तर्क-शक्ति से वह काम ले रहे थे, उसका स्रोत उपनिषद् नहीं है, वह बृहस्पति और चार्वाक की विवेक परम्परा है। वह परम्परा लुप्त नहीं हुई, वह कबीर की रचनाओं में अचानक प्रकट नहीं हो गयी, वह अन्तर्धारा के समान जनमानस में निरन्तर विद्यमान थी।

उसका नाश कभी नहीं हुआ और वह विवेक परम्परा कभी वेदान्त से मिलकर और कभी उससे अलग रहकर जनसाधारण को शासक वर्ग के कर्मकाण्डी प्रचार के प्रति सावधान करती रही।

. (*Mahavir Prasâd Dwiwedi aur Hindi Navjâgaran*, p.108-9)

After the Vedic-Age again the horizon of Indian Society got perplexed with numerous ritualistic processes, which emerged from various Brahmans, Aranyakas, Puranas and even Upanishads. Dr. Radhakrishnan describes this situation in his book "Indian Philosophy".

"The true was overwhelmed by the false and the chaos of the Brahmanical Religion, with all its conflicting theories soon reached a climax in the post-Upanishad or the pre-Buddhist period. This period was of spiritual dryness where truth hardened into tradition and morality stiffened into routine. Life became a series of observances. The mind of man moved within the iron circle of prescribed ceremonialism". (*Indian Philosophy* Vol.1, p.219)

But this concealment of knowledge and truth and retrogressive tendencies and senseless regimentation and appropriation of thinking invoked revolutionary Weltanschauung (Worldview), which resulted in the emergence of new religious movements like Jainism and Buddhism which were totally based on rationalistic worldview at the time of their advent. They put up a great resistance and lead a kind of rebellion against Brahmanical authority, wherein they rejected all kinds of rituals as well as any notion of the same.

This world view based on reason and rationality proliferated itself much later during the Bhakti Movement and became its guiding force. The poets of Bhakti Movement referred and related themselves to the common and unprivileged class of the society and they extracted and gathered their strength directly from the masses that were desperately looking for some way out to extricate themselves from the tightening noose of stiffening caste system and rituals. The fearless words of saint poets in the language of very simpleton and common masses and

rather most in dialects and Lokbhasa gave voice to working and downtrodden class so that they could also put themselves forward and identify themselves with it. The purpose of their teachings was to humanize society and to introduce and emphasize the doctrine of mutual toleration.

Among the modern thinkers Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo are amongst the greatest torchbearers of Vivek – Tradition. Vivekananda takes the task upon himself to bring human beings to the true and fundamental belief of being the human and to serve the poor and suffering mankind. He leads the fight against all old and obstinate moorings that cause denigration of man in society.

“मैं आप लोगों को अंधविश्वासी मूर्खों की बजाय पक्के अनीश्वरवादियों के रूप में देखना ज्यादा पसंद करूंगा। अनीश्वरवादी जीवित तो रहता है, वह किसी काम तो आ सकता है किन्तु जब अंधविश्वास जकड़ लेता है तब तो मस्तिष्क ही मृतप्राय हो जाता है, बुद्धि जम जाती है और मनुष्य पतन के दलदल में अधिकाधिक गहरे डूबता जाता है।

गरीबों के लिए काम की व्यवस्था करने के लिए भौतिक सभ्यता की, यहाँ तक विलास-बाहुल्य की आवश्यकता है। रोटी, रोटी! मैं यह नहीं स्वीकार करता कि जो ईश्वर मुझे यहाँ रोटी नहीं दे सकता, वह स्वर्ग में मुझे अनन्त सुख देगा।

(*Bhārtiya Chintan Paramparā*, p.373)

So it continually proves that the spiritual worldview of Indian thinkers of Vivek tradition does not part ways with the consciousness of reason & rationality, what is important, whether it has engaged society to stand up to fight all kinds of exploitation and various seen and unseen chains that are still keeping downtrodden class of society under the yoke of various economic and social oppression.

These teachers of humanity were very much convinced that the purpose of knowledge leads to humanity. This, they thought was the outcome and purpose of enlightenment and laid great emphasis on rationality and humanity.

This kind of development reflects from the very life of Immanuel Kant, the profounder of German Enlightenment. Just a few days before his death an eighty year old infirm Kant was visited by his doctor. Kant stood up to thank him in incoherent words, that he could spare time from his busy schedule. The doctor tried to counsel his patient to remain sitting. But Kant kept on waiting for the guest till he sat down. Kant then gathered all his energy to say---” Doctor, the sense of humanity has not yet left me” (Dilnot 2006). The doctor Cassire broke into tears at this. This should not be seen simply as an act of formality rather an expression, a proof, as to what meaning and value the humility and humanity had acquired at this time.

The Enlightenment of Germany in particular and Europe as a whole acquires a new thrust of knowledge, with which a new epoch of freedom begins in the

history of mankind. It freed man from the godly or heavenly planning of the world and proclaimed "the history of mankind is nothing but man's work".

So the whole polemic of enlightenment goes about the man and his position in the world--whether he should determine his position in the society himself or whether this should be left for the guardians of society. Such a tendency as to give up one's propriety of independent thinking and decision making decapitates man. This decapitation of thought robs the man of his autonomy of determining himself his position in the society. This is the reason, why Immanuel Kant while declaring his world famous Pronouncement as an answer to the question : (*Was ist Aufklärung?*) (What is Enlightenment?).

*"Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit."* (*Wege der deutschen Literatur*, p. 106) (*"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self incurred immaturity."*) (Kant 1784)

In order to stave off this immaturity Kant's advice is to *"have courage to use your own understanding."* (Kant 1784) (*Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!*). (*Wege der deutschen Literatur*, p. 106). This is of course *"the slogan of Enlightenment"*. At the same time one has to understand that Kant, through his pronouncement has appealed not only an Individual but also the whole society to realize a rightful political position through the use and employment of Reason, because then Reason is the only guiding force which is universally applicable. It also means that the so called natural world around himself rather this surrounding, consists of traditions and social structures, the self proclaimed guardians of society. Further it points out towards the fact, what one takes as destiny, is not determined by birth rather acquired or learnt and is thus subject to change. Therefore, according to Kant *"man can be put to task to get out of this statu-naturali"* (Pippin 2006:419). The utmost purpose of culture is realization of a complete disposition of commoners and realization of the idea of right of the state, people and that of a citizen of the world, which eventually facilitates the individual as well as the masses, the conditions towards realization of their freedom in the best possible way.

This theory of freedom and the enlightenment continues further with Kant, Hegel and Marx who all focus on matter and pronounce that the history of freedom is nothing but man's work.

In Europe, the epoch of enlightenment has been denoted as the age of reason and forward movement. In the name of reason, there came up new movements which envisioned and introduced new philosophy, idea and interpretation of the world. These new philosophy, idea and interpretation of the world brought about far-reaching changes in the fields of sciences, arts, economics, trade and institutions of law, state as well as in the various beliefs and religion too. And with this man could think of getting control of driving force in his struggle against natural forces.

Through the efforts and application of critical reason in all the enterprises of man and the interplay between man and society, there evolved a more rational society. The rationality derived from Enlightenment aimed at propagating humanity in society as well as not to suppress the right of others. The lessons of

humanity established harmony and peace in the barbaric society of Europe and opened the floodgates of immense progress, strengthened by various scientific inventions and consequently bringing in industrial revolution and most importantly creating a scientific temperament. The right of women, children and other suppressed classes were now preserved through Laws.

On the other hand, the Indian Vivek Tradition tried its best to humanize the society and get rid of age-old obstinate institutions of rites and rituals. In particular the Bhakti-Movement of 16<sup>th</sup> Century which encompassed all the fundamental elements of Vivek-Tradition transcended its age. It has rather inspired all the later generations and defined as well as determined the direction of all later emerging social, cultural, literary and political movements.

Ram Chandra Mishra is right when he unequivocally underlines this very basic characteristic of Bhakti Movement in his book "*Sant Sāhitya aur Samāj*" — — —

“सन्त साहित्य मूल्यपरक साहित्य है जिसमें मतवाद का विरोध और आडम्बर मिथ्याचार की भर्त्सना हुई है । साथ ही विचार-विवेक के अनुभव-सिद्ध मार्ग पर “सिर सौंप” कर चलने की अदम्य जीजिविषा परिलक्षित होती है । यही नहीं, इसमें व्यापक-व्याप्त-सत्य के प्रति समर्पित बने रहने की उत्कण्ठा सर्वोपरि लक्षित बनी रही है । मूल्यों के सम्मुख समर्पण का यह भाव साहित्य, संस्कृति और समाजतिहास में अद्वितीय घटना एवं विचार-चेतना ने ही अपने युग के अंधरों में लोक कल्याणार्थ आचरणशील ज्ञान-विचार की मशाल प्रज्वलित की थी । वह आज भी जनमानस को सही और नई दिशा देने में समर्थ हैं ।”

(*Sant Sāhitya aur Samāj*, p.III of Bhumikā)

During the freedom struggle against the British Colonization the poets and writers like Premchand, Nirala and Pant kept on lighting the lamp of the consciousness of struggle and active love for fellow human beings by dint of which the Indian Masses could put up great resistance to British rule. It is therefore no wonder that Premchand is called the modern Kabir. Hence Indian Vivek tradition in general and Bhakti movement in particular is still relevant in the present context of distortion and perversion of various faculties of arts and their applications. Furthermore, as society is getting more and more dehumanized, the Bhakti poetry as the perpetual torch bearer of Vivek Tradition has to play an even greater role in refueling and rejuvenating the moribund society. This is the reason why only a few years ago Kabir has been translated into German on the occasion of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Heidelberg University. In India Bhakti Poetry is still mostly discussed in the intellectual circle and sung by common man. It has become their medium to express their agony and amusement and their subtle feelings too. It is very much possible that Bhakti-Movement's different streams would lead to some contradictions while on the other hand the reason functioning as the sole instrument for Enlightenment to judge an event may obstruct the evolution of human faculty naturally. But in spite of all its contradictions the declaration that both the movements, the Enlightenment of Germany and the Bhakti Movement of India made, is very clear- that all the human beings in their status and rights are equal. Not only

they pronounced it, they practiced and implemented it too. With their new vision and worldview they remain immanent and perpetuate the intellectual development in Europe and India.

The universality and transcendence of a thought process keeps on expanding itself, if it does not merely remain an enclosed order of a particular race or region, rather gets guided by the spirit of the whole creation and humanity. The Enlightenment of Germany and Bhakti movement of India are two intellectual thought processes that could in true sense encompass this universal spirit and whose rich heritage has become part of whole mankind. The above comparison shows how thinkers of India and Germany attempted to deal with the fundamental problem of outlook, which was retrogressive, obstructing the progress of human race and worked for the redemption and rejuvenation of the whole mankind through their thought processes, which although were distinct from each other in their nature and behaviour yet were infallibly based on reason and rationality.

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