

A Comparative Study of Shelley's 'Utopia' and Gandhi's 'Sarvodaya'

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Utopia, the vision of an ideal state, whether fanciful, imaginative or even logical, has allured the human mind since time immemorial. Since Plato's *The Republic*, the first systematic speculation of the utopian kind, there has been a rich crop of utopian literature, tending in two directions, of escape and of reconstruction. And the utopian order conceived has been rich equally in temper and substance.

Like Sir Thomas More, the first great utopian thinker of the modern world, Shelley and Gandhi have also been haunted by the idea of the progress and perfectibility of mankind. And the vision of the one was characterised by no less earnestness than that of the other. Their views of the ideal state, again, are scattered over their writings and not concentrated in single compositions.

The ideal commonwealths, as envisaged by Shelley and Gandhi, reveal as much of affinity as of contrast. They equally denounced the evils of existing society, with its prejudice and superstition, wealth and poverty, self-seeking and expediency, oppression and war, inequality and injustice. But Shelley's denial of God was totally alien to Gandhi's line of thinking. Gandhi, however, wholly concurred with Shelley's conviction that for a society, perfection could be attained not through revolution but by a "plan of amendment and regeneration in the moral and political state of society, "without the rapidity and danger of revolution" on the one hand, and "devoid of the time-servingness of temporising reform" on the other. Gandhi, again, agreed with Shelley that love or sympathetic imagination was the instrument of social progress and that reason was but "an assemblage of our better feelings".

Shelley proclaimed that "perfection, however unattainable it may now appear to us, is the ultimate goal towards which society must move," and that a poet's high mission was to be "the unacknowledged legislator of the world" who seeks to elevate mankind by holding before them "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence." Shelley went over to Ireland ostensibly to lend support to the struggle for religious and political freedom, but he was prompted by a deeper urge to "sink the question of immediate grievance in the more general and remote consideration of a highly perfectible state of society". Gandhi, too, averred that the picture of a Sarvodaya state may appear utopian, but it has its value. "Let India live for this true picture, though never realisable in its completeness". Shelley and Gandhi both sought to evolve an ideal state on this very earth, the imperfect world of ours was to be transmuted into an earthly paradise.

Shelley's utopian order is sketched pretty elaborately in *Queen Mab*, *The Revolt of Islam* and most important of all, *Prometheus Unbound*, besides numerous references to it in his prose tracts and the prefaces and notes to his poems. In *Queen Mab*, Shelley's first important exposition of the ideal state, man stood

adorning "This loveliest earth with taintless body and mind:/ Blessed from his birth with bland impulses which gently in his noble bosom wake / All kindly passions and pure desires." Here, the "sweet bondage which is freedom's self / And rivets with sensation's softest tie / The kindred sympathies of human souls / Needed no fetters of tyrannic law". Men have now attained "meek-eyed courage" "the elevated will" "virtue, love and pleasure". Love is no longer hampered by "dull and selfish chastity / That virtue of the cheaply virtuous" but embraces many hearts. But these do not exhaust all the virtues of the utopian order. In *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley speaks of "fearless love, and the pure law of mild equality" which "succeeds To faiths which long have held the world in awe, Bloody and false, and cold". The poem, so the preface tells us, illustrates how man's aspiring after excellence serves to refine and make pure "the most daring and uncommon impulses of the imagination, the understanding and the senses". The picture, however, is still not complete: In *Prometheus Unbound*, wherein is enshrined his fullest and maturest vision of the utopian order, Shelley dwells not merely on several individual virtues hitherto unstated, but depicts the life of utopian Man. The redemption of man, effected by Love and Faith and Hope, ushers in the millennium. Hate, fear, self-love, self-contempt, hypocrisy, ignorance, "thrones, altars, judgment-seats and prison" - all are now things of the past, and Man remains

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
 Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
 Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the King
 Over himself, just, gentle, wise, but man.

In his redeemed state man withdraws from a life of activity to an isolated life of pastoral charm and ease. He dwells in a cave mantled with odorous plants, sitting and talking "of time and change as the world ebbs and flows". Prometheus says they "will entangle birds and flowers and beams which twinkle on the fountain's brim and make strange combinations out of common things:" or else search the "unexhausted spirit" "with books and words of love / For hidden thoughts, each lovelier than the last". In his pastoral seclusion he sometimes catches faint echoes of the human world in the "low voice of love", "And dove-eyed pity's murmured pain and music"/ "And all that tampers or improves man's life now free". His mind is now haunted by lovely visions and bright forms which are "the progeny immortal of painting, sculpture, rapt poesy / And arts, tho' unimagined, yet to be". Individuality is the key-note of this system, for man, having achieved his end - the ideal state - has no further need of society or government which, being but means to an end, have now outlived their utility and consequently dissolve themselves.

Unlike Shelley, Gandhi has not offered any picture of an ideal state as an accomplished fact. The ideal state remained to Gandhi the unrealised but partly realisable goal of humanity, and he applied himself to the reconstruction of society in the light of his utopian ideal. A practical idealist as he was, he cherished the utopian ideal not as a beautiful fancy, but as an inspiration and instigation to progress.

Like Shelley, however, Gandhi had a comprehensive plan for the realisation of the ideal state. Love is the foundation of this social order, a love that does not admit of oppression or exploitation, or any discrimination on grounds of caste, creed, colour and community. Its ruling principles are equality and justice in every sphere, and it seeks to unite all people in bonds of fellowship, thereby making for social harmony and good will. The all-embracing love, like the love of Shelley's Prometheus, is not conditional, governed by reciprocity; in its attributes of self-denial and self-suffering it is unflinching, unextinguishable, absolute.

Love, equally in Shelley and Gandhi, is a powerful ethical force, and is the key to the moral regeneration of man. In both, love draws life and sustenance from a deeper spiritual power, with but this difference: in Shelley, this power is the supreme Power "which wields the world with never-wearied love," a Power which, incidentally, has other attributes besides, – like Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Wisdom. In Gandhi, it is an unswerving faith in God. Shelley, never seeks to identify the benevolent Power with God, so that his metaphysical concept was destitute of any religious core. Shelley, like Gandhi, however believed in the purification and elevation of the soul and in seeking to attain inner strength through self-discipline.

Like Shelley, Gandhi adopted peaceful means for the realization of the ideal state. They both condemned war and insurrection and other violent measures to eradicate oppression, for they begot only bitterness and hatred. Instead, they sought to introduce a change in society by effecting a change of heart. As non-violent fighters for Truth, reformers should adopt the methods of persuasion, and failing that, of appeal to the conscience of the oppressor through self-suffering and even death, thereby effecting his moral conversion. Gandhi, naturally, diverged from Shelley in certain respects, as, for instance, in his schemes for the revival of village industries, of Co-operative farming, of basic education; nevertheless, they were at one in setting their goal in equality – social, political and economic – achieved through intellectual and ethical ennoblement, thereby realizing not the greatest good of the greatest number but the greatest good of all.

The egalitarian ideal of Gandhi, recalls communism in respect of its aims, but not of its means, the Gandhian society being free from materialism, violence and regimentation. But the egalitarian ideal of Shelley is the very antithesis of communism in its assumption of a highly individualistic state, men now seeking solitude for a life of introspection or otherwise of intimate companionship with Nature.

The vision of an ideal state, dear to both Shelley and Gandhi, was not a dream fantasy; imperfect man, endowed as he is with imagination and reason, has vast potentialities for good, and can usher in a better world though not without trial and travail. In this brave new world man will remain man, capable of yet further improvement. These two prophets of mankind, so alike and yet so different, each lived in the light of a hope for man and with faith in that hope.

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