

SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

This paper will focus on the concept of social justice primarily from an ancient perspective. It is an important prerequisite to ensure the firm foundation of any societal set up. One fundamental aspect of social justice since times memorial is equality-equality of opportunity, equality before the law, political equality, social equality, racial equality, class equality, economic equality and gender equality. How this notion of equality has evolved in our society, its various nuances, its significance in contemporary times- all of these have been scrutinized in this topic under consideration. In particular, this paper seeks to establish the argument that the Vedic age exemplifies the ideals of social justice, integrity and harmony, values which are found unfortunately lacking in these modern times. It foregrounds the supremacy of the Vedas in preaching and teaching a harmonious way of living.

Keywords : Social justice, equality, Vedas, harmony, collectivism, comprehensiveness

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Social justice is not a new concept in the field of sociopolitical and ethical philosophy. Virtually, the term social justice first appeared boldly in socio-political conversation in the first half of 19th century. It was employed and used by John Stuart Mill also and then its use became widespread. The term 'social justice' consists of two words: social and justice and since the inception of the society, justice was accepted as the first virtue of any social institutions. It is said that a just society is a more or less self-sufficient association of well-disciplined and ordered individuals with their disparate aims and aptitudes but they share the conception of justice. This conception is rooted in a bond of civic friendship among the members of the society.

It is assured, nowadays, that the principle of social justice paves the way for a solid foundation for social structure. This conception clearly says that originally and basically all human beings are equal and there should not be any kind of discrimination amongst the members of the society on the basis of religion, colour, caste, creed and sex.³ In other words, it can be said that social justice is completely based on social equality. It asserts that no section of the society can be or should be debarred from its fundamental rights. Our constitution provides that each and every member of the society must be given proper, ample and maximum opportunities for the complete development of his social-moral-political and economic personality.

It is a universally accepted fact that all members of the society can't be equal and they cannot be counted on equal platform because inequalities are inevitable in the basic structure of any society, whether it be primitive or modern. The conception of 'Social Justice' is very pertinent and relevant for a mutually co-operative and balanced society. It never says that there will not be any disparity at all or to promote social justice stratum will be upgraded and stratum will be degraded. On the contrary, all humanitarians, socio-political activists and our culture-tradition from a very ancient time emphasise that every effort must be made to upgrade the members of weaker society, downtrodden people and under-privileged persons in the society. In this context it is crystal clear that social justice demands and implies social security too. It can be explained in a simple way that our social structure be constructed in such a manner that each and every member is given due and fair share according to his capabilities and necessities. No body of the society should be deprived of basic living facilities. It can be proudly said that such an ideal of society is clearly laid down and depicted in the Vedas.

Vedas are the oldest source of Indian culture which contains moral, spiritual and social norms of life. Vedas inculcate the ethics of collective living and emphasise mutual love, co-operation and promote social harmony by upholding social virtues of fidelity and friendship. The success of the parameter of social justice entirely depends on the condition that the inequalities are minimised and optimum economic and social conditions are created for the different sections of the society. The concept of 'Social Justice' implies the concept of equality in itself and the former cannot be achieved in its entirety unless and until all types of equality are maintained in the society such as equality of men, equality before law, political equality, social equality, equality of race, economic equality, equality of status, etc.

Before discussing the concept of 'Social Justice' from an ancient perspective, it is mandatory to have a bird's eye view about equality. In the absence of equality social justice cannot be preached, practiced and understood. The notion of equality has rich associations

with the complexities of human life. Now, communistic notion of actual equality is dead.⁶ Primitive societies displayed as much variety in the status of individual in respect to equality as in respect to property and family and there was rough economic equality. Adopting the Buddhist doctrine China accepted the equality of men before God. But, it is true that the doctrine of equality was given much more importance outside Europe.

The meaning of equality was almost the same in the 5th century as it remains in the modern age. Herodotus was emphatic on the equality before law, equal respect for all and equal freedom of speech and political action together with regard for equality of opportunity. But it is evident that such equality does not imply economic equality. The doctrine of equality was developed under the influence of stoicism. Christianity accepted the equality of men before God. Here emphasis is not made on productive equality but on spiritual equality. St. Augustine said that worldly inequality is a part of the divine scheme of things. Accepting the Christian doctrine of spiritual equality of men before God, St. Thomas Aquinas denies that men are equals on earth. Social equilibrium is not found in the middle ages.

Modern ideas of equality were profoundly affected by Calvinism and they were taken forward by the Reformation. Calvinism strengthened the idea that human inequalities cannot be abolished. Actually, economic equality with a concrete programme took shape during English Revolution. Modern notion of equality was formulated in 18th century on the basis of recently the notion of an actual previously existent state of nature.

The concept of equality which stood in the background of a great variety of social movements which includes:

- 1. Equality of opportunity :** It that one's means career should be shaped depending on one's talent. It is true that men are born with quite different capabilities, but they should be given an equal chance to bring out what is in them. It represents individualism. To develop this type of equality social environment should be altered. Virtually, the logical outcome of it is collectiv-ism.
- 2. Equality before the law:** it does actually mean that man must always be treated as an end, not as a means. It implies in itself the practical administration of justice.
- 3. Political equality:** It is a more complex matter. In short it can be said that the ideal of political equality is centered upon universal suffrage and representative government. In philosophical meaning it can be assumed as the principle of one vote.
- 4. Social equality :** It has a humanitarian approach against any kind of slavery and injustice. It implies sexual equality also. Though we find the idea of sexual equality and social equality in Plato and Roman thinkers, this idea is essentially modern.
- 5. Racial equality :** It is a doctrinal concept and a matter of social arrangement. It occupied an important place in the 19th century. In this context it would be better to quote Darwin, who said, " the superior race is the product of evolution, that it is fittest and should prevail over other races, perhaps by their eventual extinction, certainly by their complete subordination". There are a number of factors responsible for translating the theoretical idea of race equality into social equality, which includes nationality, international law, tendency of nationalism, democratic & leveling. In spite of these dominating factors, it can be said that no social equality can be complete without economic equality.
- 6. Economic equality :** It is defined as the absolutely equal partition of all kinds of wealth among all human beings. The different 'isms' take the real meaning in different ways

according to their fundamental principles and practical usage. Some say, from each according to his ability to each according to his need. But another group of thinkers (Fourier, Saint Simon) repudiate the theory of equality of compensation. Marx bases his theory on rational organisation of production. This equality is the logical outcome of industrial revolution. But if we survey then it is clear that poverty has not been eliminated and the gap of inequalities are widened.

On the basis of the above short discussion it can be said that social justice is empty without equality. In ancient Indian perspective it can be studied on the basis of three aspects of social justice. Our ancient Foription Veda provides examples of Gender equality, Class equality and Economic equality. These are the foundation stones of social justice.

The equality between men and women is the first demand of social justice and it can proudly be said that Veda has high regard for women. Various mantras are devoted in glorifying the status of woman and their high place in the society. Satpath Brahman pits/see says the woman as the half of a man-^v/kksZ g o , "k vkReuks ;r t ;*

It clearly indicates the rights and place of a woman in the life of the present society at that time. Women were never debarred from their capacities and status. A man without wife was not considered competent to perform any sacrifice. The term 'patni' has been used in Vedas which denotes a sense of equality and justice and they were given their due regard, place and role. The women of Vedic age not only studied the Vedas but many of them have authored Vedic hymns. A woman was required to be initiated along with the man before the start of a sacrifice. It is found in the Rg-veda that man and woman equally perform the sacrificial functions. This function was the most important part of a Vedic family. At this juncture, man and woman had been given equal status, position and dignity. Actually, women were considered the lifeline of household.¹⁰ The upanishads also describe the dignified position of the woman in the society and family.¹¹ Our ancient seers clearly say that life is meaningless without the better half, patni or a woman. Man and woman are complementary to each other. During the sutra-period the status of woman remains the same with reverence and respect.

The second fundamental postulate of the Social Justice is class equality which does mean that each class of the society should be treated equally. We should not discriminate between man and man on the basis of class or caste? Vedas serve as the example of collectivism and accept the comprehensive view of society. There were no classes or castes during Vedic period, rather it represents the classless society.¹³ In the Pura-Sukta of Rg-veda it has been mentioned that there were two types of common men - the Vaisya and the Shudra. The former represents the farmer and trader whereas the latter the labourer. The supreme being manifested himself through creation in nature and in the society of men.¹⁴ It is evident that this social concept is the basis of justice having two implications and they are that four main functions must be performed by a society in order to survive in the struggle for spiritual, political and economic existence and another that each of the four has a divinity about them and their functions are equally sacred. The Upanishad also accepts and explains the four-fold vedic division of society and admits that all these functions can be performed only when all are performed side by side according to Dharma. Here dharna denotes social justice.¹⁵ It is true according to the

Vedic notion that no society can exist in the struggle for existence unless it organises four kinds of works. A perfect society needs all the four namely Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. It is known as the functional co-operation. But it is to be noted here that this idea is quite different for that of the federation of tribal and occupational groups of the later periods, which is known as the caste system. The real strength of the Vedic society lay in the differentiations of functions without dividing the people into exclusive social groups.

The Vedic division of different occupations was a balanced and scientific arrangement where all groups were free to perform their duties and it was based on the comprehensive idea of justice so that each and every member of the society may get the fruitful consequence of common good without any controversy and conflict. It is a matter of later discovery that shudra is the servant of other classes. Our most ancient scripture Veda does not permit and describe so. It accepts the dignified manual work which is skillfully performed by the Shudra. The Veda uses the terms like Kavi Manishi for Shudras, which were used for the Vedic seers. It is said in the Veda that the Vaisya traders seek splendour like the spiritual and the kingly man by pursuing their own vocation, the winning of wealth through wealth. A mantra of the Veda admits an equal attitude to all four kinds of workers. It was a development during Puranic period that the Shudra cannot be permitted to hear the Veda. But the Veda does not mention about it and says that it was to be preached to one and all. Sometimes we find the mention of Shudra before the Vaisya in the list of social groups. In the Rg-vedic age agriculture was a basic occupation and main resource of life and it is clear from the fact that India even at the fag end of 20th century is mainly dependent on cultivation and agriculture. Besides, agriculture, cattle breeding was an important occupation of the Vedic people. The Veda mentions more than four dozen professions which enumerates the diversity of the society.

It is interesting to note that an important aspect of Vedic society is that the members of all professions and occupations had an equal social status more or less. There was no competition between the different classes regarding their professions. Even the barber, tanner and the women weaving the cloth were not in any way regarded as inferior members of the community in the Vedic social structure. A verse of Rg-Veda clearly admits different classes in a single family. It is clear from this fact that each member of the society had a freedom to choose his career or profession according to his will, attitude and it was due to the condition of social justice prevalent during that period. It is also said in the Rg-Veda that variety is a natural outcome of the society. It is said 'two hands are alike, but their work is not alike, two sister cows do not give milk alike, of two twins the powers are not similar and two kinsmen are not equally pleasing.

Economic equality is a basic postulate of any society or rather a just society which wants to perform general welfare. Any society cannot survive without a sound and solid foundation of social economics. There should not be any conflict between the different classes constituting the community to attain the goal of social justice. The concept of social justice is empty without economic equality and economic equality without social justice is blind. Both are supplementary and complementary to each other. The Vedic seers gave a very serious thought to the basic principles which contributed to the evolution of an unshakable structure of social justice. It is said in the Rg-veda to support the needy, he is not a friend, who does not give to a friend, who comes imploring for

food, let the rich man satisfy one who seeks help and let him look upon a larger pathway. Wealth revolves like the wheels of a chariot, coming now to one, now to another, he does not cherish a friend. He is all sin who eats alone. This mantra speaks clearly that it was considered to be the duty of every citizen to see that all members of the society were fed besides himself.

If is very clearly mentioned in the Veda that the king is the protector of social justice, protector of the society. This protection does not mean protection from outside aggression but being protector of maintaining the established social order between different professions, classes, communities and occupations. It was the primary function of the king. His main duty was to maintain the social equilibrium in the society. It has been clearly asserted in the Atharva Veda that the king has to distribute wealth amongst the subjects equally and impartially. That king who performs his function of right distribution of wealth among his subjects with devotion and determination, gets the blessings of Gods and deities. It clearly shows and exhibits the sense of equality and impartiality of the seers, sages of Vedic age. A verse of the Upanishad declares that there was no inequality in the society.

The Smriti period also accepts the king as the foundation of justice. Manu admits it as Dharma. Ancient Indian scriptures admit administration of justice as a sacred duty. The justice place of the king has been termed as dharmasthan, dharmasan or dharmadhikaran.

In this way, it is observed that the Vedic age represents a fair picture of social justice, social integrity and sociocosmic harmony. In the Rg-Veda the term 'Rta' does mean supreme transcendental law by which the universe and gods are governed. Virtually, the Vedic concept of society is very characteristic, higher than the so-called social justice of today which is politically motivated, violent and serves the welfare of a few members of the society. The Veda believes in mutual cooperation, integral character and harmonious society. The Vedic hymns are uttered not for the well-being of selected persons but for the welfare of all. If we compare the Vedic period with utilitarian's or socialists then it is found that both are complete and comprehensive. The Vedas admit the secret of united and synthetic social life.³⁴ It is clear that there is no clear term like social justice used in the Vedic period, but it is found that everybody was free for his own upliftment and all classes were complementary to each other. A sense of equality is seen among all human beings and there are a number of hymns dedicated for the welfare of entire humanity Vedic society does not admit the place of inequalities and disparities It represents the harmonious picture of social life. It can be said that Vedic mantras do not advocate social justice but prompt social concord which is more meaningful, postulate and an essential attribute of the society.

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