
EMERSON AND THOREAU AS VISIONARIES

Prof. VIKAS SHARMA

Principal

D.A.V. (P.G.) College,
Bulandshahr

R.W. Emerson and H.D. Thoreau had their own vision of free America where people get the joy of living. Fundamental rights are granted to all of them by American constitution and the Blacks and the Whites love each other. Let the gloominess caused by slavery wither away and the light of freedom pervade in every corner of the country. In a few essays such as "American Civilization," "Love, Power," "discipline," "Prospects," "Life without Principles" etc. they assert the dignity of man as man and condemn every brutal action of the American Congress and admire the step taken by Abraham Lincoln. Like the Greek philosophers, they express their love for virtue, truth, nonviolence, harmony, re-generation and social construction. As visionaries, they knew that the shape of society cannot be changed by the state government alone and all sections of people must get rid of prejudices for brave new world and new social system.

Like Matthew Arnold, R.W. Emerson knew the difference between cultural and anarchy. In the essay "American Civilization," he illustrates the difference between civilization and chaos. People are rude and uncultured brutes if they possess racial prejudices and ignore human beings and remain static in their approach to life. Let the people have positive vision of life and break all racial barriers. Unless their companions get liberty, they will not be civilized in true sense. The evolution of society is possible when the Blacks also lead a dignified life and there is no difference between man and man. For this, political as well as economic rights have got to be granted to all sections of society. Sense of honour is as important for the American President as for the Black labourer. Like C.E.M. Joad, he does not feel any hesitation in defining the term civilization. People are civilized when they value new ideas and exchange their thoughts with others freely. If a few rich people possess material pleasures and property, it does not mean that they are civilized. Many slave traders boasted of American democracy and yet R.W. Emerson and Thoreau were not satisfied with the situation. Every nation is free to have its own civilization and no particular ideas can be imposed upon them by the outsiders. All the citizens are free to get education which they like and no particular syllabus can be imposed upon them. Many races are still savages as they are not dynamic, active and progressive. Negroes and Indians can grow and advance in every field if they come forward and get rid of illusions. A lot of discoveries have got to be made by the people so as to possess energy for making life comfortable. If people continue to adjust with their distressed situation, there will be anarchy even in future. Let them get rid of fixed ideas and establish new centres for higher studies and research. They must attach importance to action, novelty and progress. Advanced people must have sympathy for the ignorant masses and inspire them to become progressive in life. For this, other languages have got to be learnt by people so as to exchange their thought with the citizens of other countries of the world. Then, changes can be brought in the present state of affairs with the help of new outlook about nature, education, adventure, agriculture and transport system. New skills and arts have got to be learnt for social reconstruction and people must share their technical knowledge with other learned people of the world. Old barriers have got to be broken so as to share power with other. However, importance has got to be attached to power as well as tranquility. All the people must get equal chances for progress and all must share the produced goods. The slogan of the greatest good of the greatest number of people has got to be adopted in the interest of humanity. The slogan that 'one who cannot/does not work shall not eat' has got to be forgotten. The feeling, the 'struggle for existence' will continue, has got to be dropped. Every kind of violence has got to be stopped and the people must live as brothers all over the world. Society has got to be refined in every respect and profits from new inventions have got to be shared by all. Everybody must get chances for the development of his skills in case his ills are

going to benefit society at large. In the essay "Manners," he asserts the importance of decent manners like Bacon and Montaigne. Both of them attach due importance to invention, art, manners, beauty and delight and identify these qualities with civilization. The time has come for the Parliaments and colleges to pay attention to new social order based on equality, liberty and fraternity. Hunting must be stopped and new destructive weapons need not be produced in ordnance factories. New agricultural skills must be developed to produce more food grains so that people get enough food to eat. By now the Americans had started using post offices. They felt the need of new energy for various industries. As a civilized author, Emerson asserts in "American Civilization":

The division of labour, the multiplication of the arts of peace, which is nothing but a large allowance to each man to choose his work according to his faculty to live by his better hand, fills the State with useful and happy labourers, - and they, creating demand by the very temptation of their productions, are rapidly and surely rewarded by good sale: and what a police and ten commandments their work thus becomes! So true is Dr. Johnson's remark, that man are seldom more innocently employed than when they are making money.¹

Bertrand Russell later said the prudence and wisdom and necessary for the growth of civilization. Most of the ignorant masses think of their territory, religion and race and condemn other citizens of the world as brutes. Such passions have got to be dropped without delay. Respect must be paid to the idea of universal brotherhood and universal language. Emerson asserts that equal rights must be given to women so that they may contribute freely for social welfare. He asserts:

Right position of woman in the State is another index.... Place the sexes in right relations of mutual respect, and a severe mortality gives that essential charm to woman which educates all that is delicate, poetic and self-sacrificing, breeds courtesy and learning, conversation and wit, in her rough mate; so that I have thought it a sufficient definition of civilization to say, it is the influence of good women.

By these times, good poetry had not been written in America. The people of south were quarrelling with those of North and the tension grew bitter among the people. New thought could abolish these prejudices as God didn't prescribe any particular religion for Adam and Eve. Moreover, Adam didn't quarrel with Eve on the issue of religion and nationality. New skills have been invented to use the water of the ocean for human welfare. Salt has been manufactured from the water of the ocean and new research work has been done on the fishes that one watches on the ocean. Every research and invention needs liberty and Emerson says:

Civilization is the result of highly complex organization. In the snake, all the organs are sheathed: no hands, no feet, no fins, no wings. In bird and beast, the organs are released, and begin to play. In man, they are all unbound and full of joyful action. With this unswaddling, he receives the absolute illumination we call Reason, and thereby true liberty.

Attention has got to be paid to the climate of every society as it is related with civil freedom. He asserts the need of ethics for free atmosphere which is needed for research:

But one condition is essential to the social education, of man, - namely, morality. There can be no high civility without a deep mortality, though it may not always call itself by that name, but sometimes the point of honour, as in the institution of chivalry; or patriotism, as in the Spartan and Roman republics; or the enthusiasm of some religious sect which imputes its virtues to its dogma.

Civilization depends on morality. Everything good in man leans on what is higher. This rule holds in small as in great. Thus, all our strength and success in the work of our hands depend on our borrowing the aid of the elements. You have seen a carpenter on a ladder with a broad-axe chopping upward chips and silvers from a beam. How awkward! At what disadvantage he works! But see him on the ground, dressing his

timber under him. Now, not his feeble muscles but the force of gravity brings down the axe; that is to say, the planet itself splits his stick.

He admires the inventors of the wheel which could grind the corn and tides for driving the wheel. Electricity was being used for production and yet research work was encouraged to invent energy from steam and water. In other words, the scientists want to possess the power of the gods so as to control time, space and other elements. But R.W. Emerson asserts that life can be eternally happy when universal ends are achieved. It is not enough to use the cars and railways for transport. New ideas are important along with honour, justice, love, freedom and utility. It is shocking to Emerson that certain economists want to earn money with taxes on tobacco, wine and opium. Money can be earned for government schemes but he does not accept such taxes as they degrade society. Gandhi ji accepted this theory of Emerson and followed the theory of good means for good ends. Many cities of U.S.A. had advanced industries and yet remained the source of pollution and other social evils. Like Whitman, he was shocked to see that prostitution had become a social institution at several places. Thanks to God as He sent many prophets like Christ, Zeno, Luther etc. who gave new conviction to the masses. Gunpowder, rubber-shoes, printing machines etc. are useless without ethics. Unfortunately, unethical means were adopted for material growth in New York, Boston and other cities. Like Montesquieu he asked- Are people really free? Is liberty not checked? Are Black women not tortured? Since complex structures are established, the higher ethical values have withered away. Exploitation of labourers continued. Emerson laments:

We have attempted to hold together two states of civilization: a higher state, where labour and the tenure of land and the right of suffrage are democratic: and a lower state, in which the old military tenure of prisoners or slaves, and of power and land in a few hands, make an oligarchy: we have attempted to hold these two states of society under one law. But the rude and early state of society does not work well with the later, nay, works badly, and has poisoned politics, public morals, and social intercourse in the Republic, now or many years.

Now he asserts the need of secularism, sensibility, zeal and discipline to fulfill his mission and see real prosperous and civilized society. He remarks:

The telegraph has been swift enough to announce our disasters. The journals have not suppressed the extent of the calamity. Neither was there any want of argument or of experience. If the war brought any surprise to the North, it was not the fault of sentinels on to watch towers, who had furnished full details of the designs, the muster and the means of the enemy. Neither was anything concealed of the theory or practice of slavery. (238)

Americans will be really civilized when they have men of perception and original action and he puts George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in this category. The country does not need any dictator who controls legislative, executive and judicial powers in his hands. New demands were being made in 1860 to retain the slavery system and Emerson and Thoreau raised their voice for liberation and emancipation. Then they asked the people of Southern states to cooperate with the citizens of Northern states. As minute observers of humanity, they wanted harmony among all labourers of various units. The mischief of slavery had done a lot of harm to the nation. To retain path of love they asked people to follow the path of love and peace. Further delay for this will cause immense losses to community. Only right action and right conduct will solve the problem. All the Senators and other Parliamentarians must have patience, tolerance, faithfulness, hope and rational thinking for the protection of democracy.

In the essay *Power*, Emerson refers to the human tendency to capture power. A few people want to lead the human race through political power. Most of them want to gain material gains with the help of their power. However, only a selected few have the ability and capability to come forward and lead the nation. Many honest leaders get the reward of their deeds and the examples of Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Pt. Nehru,

Gandhi, and Dr. Radhakrishnan etc. could control the situation due to their vision and prudence. A mature person knows how to taste the elixir and get success in his mission. Here Emerson refers to the opinion of King Lear that 'nothing is get for nothing.' Napoleon Bonaparte fought a lot of battles and got success in his mission on most of the occasions. Once he had sixty thousand soldiers and thirty thousand of them were rogues and wicked people. Yet he had the power to control them for his mission. These bold people are unique in themselves and bold blood circulates in their arteries. They knew how to overcome the situation with their physical and intellectual strength. Constantly they work for the goal and ultimately succeed. For example, Shakespeare came to London in search of a job and lived here soon as a theatre manager. Many sculptors continue to work hard with their hammer and chisel and ultimately succeed like Michael Angelo. Once Michael Angelo took a lot of time to select his stones and mud and people laughed. But all of them were surprised with the statue that he prepared. Here Emerson refers to vivacity of such powerful artists and writers. There is a certain instinct, perhaps a divine gift, that guides them through purification. He refers to children who don't win the competition in the first attempt. Some of them don't lose heart as they want to win the prize. Ultimately, they win with their regular work and gusto. Such people harden themselves when they face the problems and oddities and don't bow down before unimportant, political situations. For example, Pt. Nehru and Gandhi didn't surrender before British imperialism and ultimately won national freedom. He gives the example of trees that remain firmly rooted in the earth even at the time of storm. Many sailors don't care for the rocks of the ocean and the tempest. Many farmers sow the seeds and don't bother for bad weather. Many scientists don't depend upon the government help and yet discover new things for human welfare. People like Marconi can be referred here as example to confirm the statement of Emerson. Then he refers to the terms like 'Commerce,' 'reason,' 'balancing of judgment,' 'power of the mind' etc. Like other thinkers, he also accepts 'an idea without action is mental debauchery.' Hence, promptness is one of the qualities required for success. Otherwise people suffer like Hamlet if they delay in taking action. Such people have strong will-power as Emerson says in "Power" :

And, in morals, wild liberty breeds iron conscience; natures with great impulses have great resources, and return from far. In politics, the sons of democrats will be Whigs; whilst red republicanism, in the father, is a spasm of nature to engender an intolerable tyrant in the next age. On the other hand, conservatism, ever more timorous and narrow, disgusts the children, and drives them for a mouthful of fresh air into radicalism. (42).

There are cunning and wicked politicians in the country and they know how much tyranny is tolerated by the common people. Certain people are not purely ethical and yet pretend to be the benefactors of mankind. He refers to a knave who could win the hearts of people easily and yet remained cruel in his deeds. So, power has got to be used properly in general interest if one wants to make one's name immortal in the world. Since a few merchants possess the power of taking great risk, they succeed in their business. The profits they earn from their industries confirm this argument of Emerson. A few persons depend upon others for help. But the successful people often go alone and continue the march. For example, the friends of Lincoln didn't accept his proposal of granting equality to the Blacks. Quite often the members of the party drag one's legs. Here Emerson uses the term energy, spiritual courage and ethics. Only dreaming about bright future is not enough. One has to work regularly for success. He has to adopt the policy of the gardener who cuts off the useless grass near the plant. That means concentration for the aim. Quite often one has to sacrifice the joy of gossiping with friends and other lower duties. Then, he must practice the same thing regularly unless he gets success. Regarding faithful work, Emerson remarks in "American Civilization" :

Friends, books, pictures, lower duties, talents, flatteries, hopes, - all are distractions which cause oscillations in our giddy balloon, and make a good poise and a straight course impossible. You must elect

your work; you shall bake what your brain can, and drop all the rest. Only so, can that amount of vital force accumulate, which can make the step from knowing to doing. (48).

A few leaders and teachers fail to express their thoughts in public due to sense of fear. He gives the example of a person who wanted to learn German language and failed several times. Yet he did not lose heart and continued learning the German language regularly and ultimately succeeded. However, he does not unite success with eccentricity. One must get rid of one's follies for success in this complex world. He writes in "Power":

Success has no more eccentricity, than the gingham and muslin we weave in our mills. I known no more affecting lesson to our busy, plotting New England brains, then to go into one of the factories with which we have lined all the watercourse in the States. A man hardly knows how much he is a machine, until he begins to make telegraph, loom, press, and locomotive, in his own image. But in these, he is forced to leave out his follies and hindrances, so that when we go to the mill, the machine is more moral than we. (53)

Towards the end of the essay, he warns that good means should be adopted to achieve good ends. Yet he aptly relates virtue with truth and talent. Similarly, he highlights the importance of discipline in the essay "Discipline." He tries to illustrate the meaning of space, time, society, labour, climate, food, the animals, the machine etc. Since prudent people possess wisdom, they know what is good and what is hateful. Their scale is different from that of the ignorant people. The wise man knows that the world is wide and complex and hence it is not easy to explore it.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson hopes that the tree of knowledge and the tree of life will prosper in U.S.A. definitely. The American scholars, artists, sculptors, musicians, literary artists, scientists, botanists etc. will contribute to the general welfare. The people will define rest, motion, gravitation, change and other aspects of nature after making experiments. All those experiments will be made with positive approach. The scholars will touch the depth of the subject and analyze all the aspects of life. After reading books, they will enlighten society for intellectual and spiritual growth.

In "Life without Principle," H.D. Thoreau criticizes the people who work hard only for material gains and ignore real knowledge, real wisdom, truth, prudence, virtue etc. Their ways of life are ridiculous for him, as they miss the basic aims of life. Once one gentleman asked him – What he thought. As a matter of fact, Thoreau was not interested in trivial news that was printed in the newspapers. The worldly news regarding the rise and fall of market rates were useless for him. At some other time, another gentleman asked him to share his thoughts on slavery. Actually, Thoreau never wanted to utter unpleasant words on this question too and hence turned down the proposal.

Like William Wordsworth and Shelley, he found that most of the people were conscious of their material gains. Business was most important for them but not for Emerson and Thoreau. Thoreau found no wisdom in the game of dollars and cents. He asked himself–Should he engage himself in meaningless labours? Unfortunately, people thought of cutting the trees and not planting them. He was never prepared for any irksome drudgery. One rich man was proud of himself as he had a lot of servants and spent a lot on luxuries. But this fellow ignored the beauty of the objects of nature. It confirms that Emerson and Thoreau gave due importance to the objects of nature. Like the followers of the *Gita*, both of them wanted that people should live as liberated human beings and not as slaves of money. The materialistic people are less than human beings. Both of them surveyed the object of nature and wanted that others should follow them for a life of bliss. To them, most of Americans were working for lower ends. Why to work only for money and not dignity and truth? This question was asserted by Thoreau again and again.

He noticed advertisements in the newspapers for active men and not wise fellows. In the worldly sense, he had failed miserably. Yet he ever felt as an Indian yogi. Let others mind their own business and never feel

bothered for him. He failed to understand why the people were jealous of his freedom. Since he is not worried about money, he is happy. Others are worried as they want to get more and more wealth and assets. As a follower of the *Gita*, he wanted to perform his duty regularly and that too with love and told people : 'You must get your living by living.' Quite a large number of people realized during the church service that their expenses are higher in comparison to their income. Thoreau gives a new definition of success and greatness. As a student of literature, he was happy in his own world and thought of virtue, mortality and truth. He knew well in advance that money teaches certain wicked ways and the same are not permitted by God. Cold weather and hunger failed to make him nervous. Trade and commerce developed in many American cities but Thoreau never felt tempted to join these merchants. As products of Harvard university, both of them could make money even in the teaching profession. Since they loved personal liberty like Rousseau, Byron and Shelley, they made no compromise with the situation. They refused to be 'gold diggers' in society. They thought of God's coffers and not earthly coffers. Thoreau asked in a light mood : Is God a rich person?

Let others think that Thoreau's life was a failure or unsatisfactory. Yet he led a life of love and reverence and not cunningness. When he analyzed the life of many preachers, he noticed that only a few were moral teachers. Thoreau had a moral vision in life and, like prophets, thought of the results of a truthful life. He can be called an intellectual like Emerson. Inner values were highly important for him. As civilized people, Emerson and Thoreau tried to create a new civilized society in U.S.A. They wanted America to have her own culture, civilization, literature, history, music and fine arts. They asked people to get rid of hollow values and not to imitate the Britishers any more:

"Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the remains of foreign harvests. Events, action arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the polestar for thousand years." (45).

REFERENCE

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of R.W. Emerson* (New York : Tudor), Vol. III, 227-28.