



“A Portrait of Ruskin’s Genius”

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Abstract

John Ruskin was a philanthropist, a water-colourist, a draughtsman, a prominent social thinker, an art patron as well as the leading English art critic of the Victorian era. Though he spent his boyhood in the reign of King George IV (1820-30), he mainly belongs to the Age of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). He was one of the greatest thinkers and writers of the Victorian Age. He was both a critic of literature and society. He was the prophet of his age and viewed the social, political and economic life of his time from the viewpoint of a seer and philosopher. He produced works of lasting value on a variety of subjects such as education, music, art and literature. His works are voluminous and treading through them is like passing through a luxuriant garden, rich in flowers and fruits, emanating fine fragrance from all quarters in such an over cloying measure that one is likely to be detained by the loveliness of the first flower, the first blossoming tree in its vernal beauty, rather than proceed ahead to enjoy greater beauties at the farther end. His works on economy, art, education and literature are worthy of great consideration.

Keywords: Philanthropist, reform, education, economy

Introduction

John Ruskin, a philanthropist, a water-colourist, a draughtsman, a prominent social thinker, an art patron as well as the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, was born on 8 February, 1819 at Brunswick Square in London. He was the only child of John James Ruskin and Margaret Cox. His father was a Scot who came to London as a clerk to a firm of wine merchants but later on founded his own firm in the same trade. His mother was a strict Evangelical and Spartan who believed in austerities, and

as a child, Ruskin had to submit to the discipline of his mother. Ruskin was first educated by his mother, then by private tutors and so missed the discipline of public schools. Ruskin's parents were very pious having strong moral characters and they powerfully influenced the young Ruskin. As her mother was a religious-minded lady, she asked her son to read the Bible daily with her and to learn whole portions by heart. It was read chapter by chapter till the end and begun all over again and completed in the same manner till he went to Oxford for higher studies. His father was not so impressive as the mother. He was a man of broad literary sympathies and artistic tastes. He was an admirer of Shakespeare, Cervantes, Scott and Byron. He read their works to his son and stimulated a literary taste in him. He wished his son to write poetry like Byron one day but only "purer".

Secondly, he was educated privately under various tutors to whom he was a credit. It was in 1837 that he joined Christ Church College, Oxford for the honours course but had to give it up and be satisfied with an ordinary degree. He took it in 1841 and left Oxford. After leaving Oxford, for nearly two years, he wandered over Italy, searching for health and cheerfulness, and gathering materials for the first volume of *Modern Painters*, the book that made him famous. Later on, he was thrice appointed as Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford between 1870 and 1878, in 1883 and in 1884. Ruskin was 'a man of high moral principles, of splendid intellectual power, of luxuriant imagination, all of which qualities he turned on to a rich variety of subject-matter'.

Though he spent his boyhood in the reign of King George IV (1820-30), he mainly belongs to the Age of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). He was one of the greatest thinkers and writers of the Victorian Age. He was both a critic of literature and society. He was the prophet of his age and viewed the social, political and economic life of his time from the viewpoint of a seer and philosopher. He produced works of lasting value on a variety of subjects such as education, music, art and literature. His works are voluminous and treading through them is like passing through a luxuriant garden, rich in flowers and fruits, emanating fine fragrance from all quarters in such an over cloying measure that one is likely to be detained by the loveliness of the first flower, the first blossoming tree in its vernal beauty, rather than proceed ahead to enjoy greater beauties at the farther end. His works on economy, art, education and literature are worthy of great consideration.

Some of his works deal with the social and political conditions of his times. He was highly dissatisfied with the material glory, power and pelf of the capitalists of his time. He was against the material progress of the age and the mechanical view of life. He was horrified and disgusted with the sweeping tide of materialism and industrialism, and the spirit of mills and factories, emitting out foul smoke and spoiling the charm of the countryside, pained him intensely and deeply. Hence, the important thing that Ruskin did was to direct the attention of the Victorians to the evils of industrialism and to win them back to the life of simplification and glorification of nature. The strength of his writings lay in the clarity and force with

which he vigorously assailed the irrationalities of the industrial system and the debasement of human nature brought about by the poisonous fumes of the machine-system of production.

Though, the germs of social reform are already in Ruskin and had been partly demonstrated in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* where he deals with the leading principles of architecture. The seven lamps are those of sacrifice, power, truth, beauty, memory, life and obedience. It is one of the least ornate of his books but is the best reasoned. In this book, he puts up a spirited defence of Gothic as the noblest and the finest style of architecture, and labours to relate art and morality. The year 1860 marked a formal beginning in Ruskin's career. He took up the cause of social reform in this year when he came out as a social reformer with all his high fervour, high aims, his keen insight and astonishment, his unselfishness, his perversity and wisdom.

In his *Munera Pulveris*, he criticises the political economy of his time and lays a number of precepts and propositions to regulate the action of society. It purports to be an accurate analysis of the laws of political economy, and the prevailing conceptions about wealth. In this book, Ruskin attacks the conceptions of wealth which were held dear by orthodox economists. He condemned and criticises the outmoded theories of political economists and suggest that true political economy ought to be a branch of sociology because ultimately there is no wealth but life.

His *Time and Tide* expresses his ideas about social reconstruction in a series of twenty five letters, addressed to one Thomas Dixon, a working woodcutter of Sunderland. These letters deal with subjects like co-operation, legislations, expenditure, entertainment, contentment, thanksgiving, education, episcopacy, marriage etc. These letters contain a number of startling proposals. Ruskin lays emphasis on social regeneration rather than mere political reform, such as was brought about by the second Reform Bill. Ruskin, in this work, seeks to point out that the condition of England in its social and economic side was a matter of greater attention and concern than merely giving political rights and establishing constituencies and ballot boxes. The work principally deals with the problem of poverty and its removal from society. The gist of these letters was that State takes precedence over the individual.

Ruskin also criticised the educational system of his own days. In his opinion, the great fault in the educational system was its insistence on quantity of information rather than quality of knowledge. He says, "You do not educate a man by telling him what he knew not, but in making him what he was not." He insisted on the dominance of moral ideas in teaching in order to form character and upon a greater adherence to facts of nature and human life. It was a great defect of the educational system that it was based on commercial considerations. The people wanted education only for making money. Education was, therefore, vitiated by the money-taint and aesthetic Spenser that the function of education is to prepare people for complete living. Ruskin also emphasized the importance of field-excursions and country-rambles in education.

He expressed his views on Women in the *Of Queen's Gardens* (in *Sesame and Lilies*). In this second part of the book (first being *King's Treasuries*), Ruskin considers the question of women's place and education. His theory is that the purpose of all education is to acquire power to bless and to redeem human society, and in this noble work, women must always play the leading part. Ruskin was always at his best in writing of women or for women, and the lofty idealism of this essay, together with its rare beauty of expression makes it, on the whole, the most delightful and inspiring of his works.

Ruskin found his age too much engrossed in material pursuits. The world was too much with people and they wasted their energies in getting and spending. The Victorian prosperity dazzled the eyes of man who utterly lost sight of spiritual heritage. Darkness surrounded him on all sides. Ruskin heralded a note of warning to his generation and tries to raise it to that pedestal of morality from where man as man could be perceived. His ugliness, his low and mean habits could not be seen from this vantage point.

Ruskin's *Unto This Last* expresses his message very clearly and powerfully. This work was first contributed to Cornhill Magazine in the form of articles, but so great was the outcry at the novel economic views of the author that Thackeray, the editor of the Magazine, had to discontinue the publication of Ruskin's papers. It was later on published by a daring publisher after its appearance in *Frazer's Magazine*, edited by Froude. The book had a very significant impact on Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhi ji discovered this book in 1904 through Henry Polak, whom he met in South Africa. After reading the book, Gandhi ji decided immediately not only to change his own life according to Ruskin's teachings, but also to publish his own newspaper, Indian Opinion, from a farm where everyone would get the same salary, without any distinction of function, race, or nationality. This, for that time, was quite revolutionary. Gandhi ji translated *Unto This Last* into Gujarati in 1908 under the title of *Sarvodaya*, meaning "Well Being of All".

The book consists of four essays: (1) The Roots of Honour, (2) The Veins of Wealth, (3) Qui Judicates Terram, (4) Ad Valorem. In these essays, Ruskin deals with the problem of wages, the relation of the employers and the labourers and the true nature of wealth, consisting not in material products but in the producing of as many as possible full-breathed, bright-eyed and happy hearted human creatures. The entire work is, in fact, an attack on the prevalent system of political economy. The main aim of the author is to expose the materialism of the age and to draw the attention of industrialists and the leaders of the state to give more attention to the spiritual side of man's life than merely to his physical needs.

His *Unto This Last* was considered at the time of its publication as the beautiful vaporing of an impractical idealist. To the materialists of the age, interested in money-earning, the work seemed certainly impractical, but the latter socialists found a hard

core of wisdom in the book and worked out its tenets in actual practice. Much of what Ruskin had set out to propound is now an accomplished fact and in socialistic countries, the message of *Unto This Last* has been imbibed in the fullest measure possible. It is increasingly recognised that machines tend to demoralise and dehumanise man and that means must be sought to make man the master and not the servant of the machines.

The great value of this work lies mainly in the direction of labour-reform. Ruskin chalks out a full programme for improving the conditions of labourers and their relationships with the capitalists. The author stresses the need of establishing training-schools for labourers and pleads for the eradication of unemployment from the ranks of the workers by providing them opportunities for work. For the old and workers, Ruskin advocates the establishment of comfortable homes where they may be able to receive proper attention. All this has to be done in justice and not in charity because “labour serves his country as truly as does soldier or statesman and a pension should be no more disgraceful in one case than in the other.”

Ruskin criticised the political economy of his time. It was based on ‘laissez faire’ while Ruskin expressed himself in favour of socialism. He gave new definitions to various terms used in political economy as wealth, utility and cost, etc. According to the economists of the day, wealth is a question of material welfare only whereas Ruskin maintains that material welfare must be balanced by the character of the labour that goes to produce it, its duration, monotony, wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. Wealth is what it does and produces. It must increase human happiness, health and character. Work that debilitates people, drawing away its best energies, can produce only a sorry kind of wealth. The only true wealth, in fact, is life. In *Unto This Last* he writes: “*There is No Wealth But Life*- Life including all its powers of joy, of love and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings.”

He has examined the theory of wages, contesting the point that they are ‘universally or even generally determined by the exclusive action of competition’. Other considerations enter in, such as custom and good feeling. “Cheap labour is not merely bad from the standpoint of morality. It is bad even from the lower standpoint of economy. For cheap labour means impoverished lives, and impoverished lives mean inefficient work. The consumer gains at the outset, but loses ultimately, for if you squeeze wages to starvation-point, you get inferior work and shoddy goods.” He wanted that fixed wages be paid to labourers instead of their being determined by pure demand and supply.

Ruskin could tolerate specialisation only upto a point. About the evil effects of specialisation or division of labour, he writes: “Specialisation is good upto a point, but over-specialisation is bad, for it deadens the worker. A man whose labour consists, say, in makin a fractional part of a pin becomes a mere machine. Division of labour

you call it, it is division of human-beings- dividing men into segments”. He wanted labour to be healthy and pleasurable. He found everybody at fault for the present state of economic affairs. He frankly says, “Nor we must blame the employer only for this state of things; the public, the consumer, are also at a fault. They demand cheap things, not good things. Were they longer-sighted they would realise that in the long run the good thing is the cheap thing.”

Ruskin proposes universal elementary education, technical education for labourers, fixed wages, unemployment-relief, sickness insurance, old age pensions, model factories run by government and compulsory unpleasant labour for those found unwilling to work and earn their livelihood. Most of these measures have been accepted by most modern governments. His contribution lies in having thought out such a programme of social reform in an atmosphere hostile to it. In his days, England had no system worth mentioning, of public education. The workers were illiterate and miserable. They had to work for long hours in insanitary conditions. They had no right to form trade unions, and collective bargaining was forbidden as a violation of the law of contracts. Old age pensions were unknown and so was unemployment-allowance.

In *Unto This Last*, Ruskin thunders against this inhuman system with all the vehemence and eloquence that he could command, his purpose being to restore once again the infinite number of wretched down-trodden men, women and children, specially children, to a healthy and happy life. His hostility to machinery, to usury, to war, to capitalism, to unrestrained freedom in business and industry, are to be judged from this point of view. Many of the reforms which he suggested have already been pulled through. Many of his views are the commonplaces of to-day, but he was first to express them in his inimitable, trenchant style.

Ruskin taught his age that wealth is not the equivalent of happiness. Factories and mills deprive man of natural surroundings and contaminate his soul. In place of greenery, he sees the smoke of the chimney and instead of the chirpings of birds and musical flow of mountains and streams; he listens to the sirens of factories and mills. Monetary habits degrade human beings and they become so shameless and cruel as to exploit their own brothers and sisters without any tinge of repentance or any fear from God. In such a society, avarice becomes the guiding principle and social affections are considered as accidental and disturbing elements in human nature- “Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious- certainly the least credible is the modern ‘soi-distant’ science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection”. (*Unto This Last*) Ruskin opposes this statement of the political economist. To him, no social action is possible without social affection. We agree with him today when we have to tackle labour problem. Strikes and lock-outs have become very common because of employer-labour relations. Employers do not love

their labourers as they should do. Ruskin's message in this respect is very practical. Men are more valuable than money- this is the message of Ruskin in all the books.

Unto This Last expresses Ruskin's message very clearly and powerfully. In Para 275 of *Ad Valorem*, this message is given a nice poetical image. If we read the message, we find it as the very basis of internationalism. If U.N.O one day achieves this objective (which, to me appears very difficult, judging the present drift of things in the worlds), the earth will be converted into a heaven and we will become divine beings. Compton-Rickett summarises Ruskin's message as follows, "No writer in Victorian times did more than Ruskin to draw attention to the terrible wastage going on in the social organism- under present economic conditions- and to stir the individual to more serious effect in the cause of human brotherhood, not in the spirit of condescending charity, but in the saner and ampler spirit of common justice."

Ruskin not only looked with extraordinary insight into the present, but also tried to interpret the future and forecast things. Many of his predictions have proved to be true. He prophesied the end of the world, and today we find the world almost on the verge of destruction through neglect of the things which he said were vital to human affairs and through the exaltation of things which were vicious in human beings. We see our civilization fast hastening into decay- as being the inevitable result of the forces which he denounced and for which denunciations he was regarded as mad man by the people of his own time.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can safely say that Ruskin had the necessary experience and qualifications of a social reformer, fertile mind, technical knowledge of economy and sociology, acquaintance with the labour-classes and the faculty to argument. His reformatory views on political economy, capital, wealth, labour, distribution of work, fixation of wages, over-specialisation and conditions of workers, and are a proof of this. Ruskin also expressed his views on the status and role of women, on education and stressed on the need of morality in education. His views have been the foundation of future social and political reforms. He is the source of inspiration to others and he, himself was influenced by Turner's Naturalism. His contribution as a social reformer, as a critic of art and literature, as a prophet, a preacher and as a political economist is unique and original. He was a universal prophet and a real Messiah of the working classes.

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