

## CONCEPT OF WEALTH AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A READING OF JOHN RUSKIN'S *UNTO THIS LAST*

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### Abstract

John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is a critique of the political economy of Victorian England. It deals with the concept of wealth - its production and improper distribution creating imbalance in political economy. This paper analyses Ruskin's views on workers' wages, the virtues and vices of masters and operatives, how wealth can be saved from hoarding, about justice in a workplace and how wealth breeds wealth in the true sense of the term. In this short review, it is examined how Ruskin's observations are relevant in today's context and how it deals with the problematic of socio-economic circumstances of contemporary society. It particularly concerns his rational ideas on wealth, welfare of the society and empirical observation on ethical responsibilities of every individual that can directly contribute to the growth and development of political economy.

John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is a critical essay on social economy of Victorian era in England. It witnesses the devastating and vicious effect of Industrial Revolution, the detrimental effect of the rise of the bourgeois, the subjugation of the lower strata of the society, etc. This paper tends to analyse how Ruskin has aptly shown the conditions and circumstances that determine the establishment of extreme economies in society, how wealth is created, hoarded and amassed by the policy makers and hegemonies who control all the markers of society, how the rich dupe, subjugate and oppress the poor to regulate their progress and to dominate on all the hierarchies of society as wealth is power, and Ruskin conceptualize wealth as "the possession of the valuable by the valiant" (*Unto This Last* 211).

*Unto This Last* was vehemently criticised when it was first published in December 1860 in *Cornhill Magazine* in a series of four articles in four consecutive months, after which the publisher was forced to stop publishing the essay (Moore 73). But Ruskin's practical observation towards society, his determination to expose the production, control and misuse of wealth by the rich and powerful, his zeal to bring a reformation in Victorian society through his pen, led him to accumulate all the four essays in a book form that was ultimately published two years later in 1862. Ruskin's views on wealth and political economy is still read and often cited because

though it is drawn not on the framework of conventional mainstream economics yet it can provide a clear alternative to the unreformed social system (Lawson 767). It deserves mention that in 1906, new Labour Members of British Parliament cited *Unto This Last* as the most worthy, significant and influential book that had inspired them most in their life and works (Henderson 26). In these essays, Ruskin has undertaken the task of critically analysing the conventional approach that determines the wages of the labourers and also improper drainage of wealth. He has also taken a stand to show that justice is missing, denied, and lost in Victorian society and immorality has devoured it leading to its degradation and disintegration. Therefore he essentially seeks ethical, moral and just economic transactions in society, equal distribution of wealth, proper concentration, allocation, circulation and drainage of wealth and its effective value creating balance, harmony, equilibrium and consequently pleasure in society, as Valji Govind Desai writes in the Introduction of *Unto This Last: A Paraphrase*:

This exclusive search for physical and economic well-being prosecuted in disregard of morality is contrary to divine law, as some wise men in the West have shown. One of these was John Ruskin who contends in *Unto This Last* that men can be happy only if they obey the moral law.... Morality is an essential ingredient in all the faiths of the world, but apart from religion, our commonsense indicates the necessity of observing the moral law. Only by observing it we hope to be happy. (1)

Proper allocation and distribution of wealth depends on many factors like wage, master, worker, time, conditions and limits of workplace etc., and these need to be discussed before. In the very first essay “The Roots of Truth”, John Ruskin begins with how political economy rests on the relationship between ‘master’ and ‘operative’. Usually the interests of the masters are different, diverse, self-loving and antagonistic towards the operative (the labourers) breeding disputes and violence in society. Until and unless the motives, interests and purposes of both the masters and the operatives are set into one plane, no fruitful result is desired. As Ruskin says that, “it can never be shown generally either that the interests of master and labourer are alike, or that they are opposed; for, according to circumstances, they may be either. It is, indeed, always the interest of both that the work should be rightly done, and a just price obtained for it” (*Unto This Last* 169).

Citing an example of a relationship between a master and a servant, Ruskin says that if a master is a sensible man, who shows affections and justice towards his domestic help, much material gain may be accomplished under loads of work. He takes up other examples of relationship between ‘master’ and ‘operative’ that exists between the commander of a troop and his army, the chief of a gang of burglars and his gang, the head of a group of legal practitioners and his group, etc. Ruskin shows that though there are personal conflicts, prejudices and antagonisms within a troop of soldiers, but their discipline and ethical behaviour always urge them to act unitedly, always ready to lay down their lives at the command of their chief, as Desai puts it: “a charge may often be successful though the men dislike their officers; a battle has rarely been won, unless they loved their general” (7). Even a band of robbers may be unified by the bond of affection, but in contrary, such emotions and love are missing in a group of legal practitioners. Therefore Ruskin concludes that team work is necessary to taste the fruit of labour and affection and justice bind, enhance, synchronize and co-ordinate a team of workers.

Ruskin then emphasizes on equal wages for all labour. He points out that the right system is that which respects all labour at a fixed rate, provided that the skilled worker dedicated towards the work is employed, whereas, the unskilled and escapist is unemployed. Secondly, he

says that maintaining constant number of workmen in employment will certainly enhance the quality of the product, will provide regular source of labour and wage for every workman and will always curb the master's inclination towards larger profit by employing less number of workers according to his will. It is because as Ruskin says: "The tendency of all modern mercantile operations is to throw both wages and trade into the form of a lottery, and to make the workman's pay depend on intermittent exertion, and the principal's profit on dexterously used chance" (*Unto This Last* 174).

Ruskin takes up a comparison between the profession of a soldier, lawyer, clergy and physician with that of a merchant in order to focus on the moral obligation of wealth. He has rightly pointed out that the profession of a soldier is always held with honour by the world as a soldier dedicates his life for the service of the nation, a lawyer make every effort to judge with justice under any circumstances, a physician treats and cures his patients with care at any and every time whatever difficulties may come on his way, a clergy shows the right direction to his parishioners, but, a merchant's profession is presumed to aim at personal profits. Unlike a soldier, a clergy, or a physician who strive to work for the benefit of the community with some ethical obligation to defend some moral value with their lives, if required, a man of commerce grabs more yield for his own, leaving as less as he can for his customers. Thus, the public estimate of reverence and respect goes down for a merchant who is often criticised, rebuked and condemned for being selfish, having greed for money and cozening. The profit is only legal and genuine if it can be made by not destroying the greater good of the people. However, Ruskin suggests that proper distribution of wealth is possible when like all other professions, if a businessman intermittently, willingly and gladly gives up his profit for the good of his customers directly adding up to the beneficial requirement of the society, as:

In true commerce, as in true preaching, or true fighting, it is necessary to admit the idea of occasional voluntary loss; — that sixpences have to be lost, as well as lives, under a sense of duty; that the market may have its martyrdoms as well as the pulpit; and trade its heroisms as well as war.... And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to die for it.... For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live. (*Unto This Last* 177)

Ruskin concludes his first essay saying the in the production of wealth, business-class of society holds paternal authority, because in the production of goods and commodities that involve many lives and hands, the ultimate responsibility rests on the merchant who like a captain of a ship, not only governs the whole system of production right from guarding the kind of livelihood of his employees to maintaining the purest and cheapest form of products available in the market, but also contributes to the benefits of the community. Desai explains Ruskin's views thus:

And as the captain of a ship is bound to be the last man to leave his ship in case of wreck and to share his last crust with the sailors in case of famine, so the manufacturer, in any commercial crisis, is bound to take the suffering of it with his men, and even to take more of it for himself than he allows his men to feel; as a father would in a famine, shipwreck or battle, sacrifice himself for his son. (*Paraphrase* 11)

In the second essay "The Veins of Wealth", John Ruskin begins to distinguish between 'political economy' and 'mercantile economy'. He says that 'political economy' involves production, preservation and distribution at a given time and place generating worthy, helpful

and pleasurable things, but ‘mercantile economy’ implies the accumulation of wealth in the hands of an individual who usually is the head of an organization and often overpower, dominate and control the workers working under him, creating two extreme disparities of a social order – one smothering under the chains of debt and poverty, and, the other drawing riches as much as they can in their custody. Thus, it can be stated that the ultimate success lies in achieving power over men in the name of riches. Therefore, Ruskin deduces that “wealth” has two components: material possessions/ ownership and power. Christopher May points out that “Wealth (or riches) is an aspect of power over others, not power/control of any specific resources themselves, and wealth maximisation implies that political economy is the science of ‘establishing the maximum inequality in our own favour’ (*Unto This Last* 182), rather than the establishment and development of widespread social welfare” (“Political Economy” 191). The power of wealth is directly proportional to the poverty of the people over whom it is exercised, and it is inversely proportional to those who have amassed wealth and riches and are always ready to pay for those goods and commodities that have very limited supply. Ruskin argues on this issue:

Inequalities of wealth, unjustly established, have assuredly injured the nation in which they exist during their establishment; and, unjustly directed, injure it yet more during their existence. But inequalities of wealth, justly established, benefit the nation in the course of their establishment; and, nobly used, aid it yet more by their existence. (*Unto This Last* 182)

It can be stated that the formation and development of the mercantile wealth which involves control on labour signifies a political reduction of the real wealth which consists in significant and considerable possessions. As the title of this essay goes, Ruskin concludes that the true veins of wealth lies in flesh (men) and not in material possessions. Thus, Christopher May comments that, “Ruskin’s assessment of wealth, its social accumulation and deployment is built upon its impact on social and human welfare, and wealth’s ability to further these wider ends. In contemporary terms Ruskin’s analysis depicts wealth as a social relation” (“Political Economy” 197).

In the third essay “Qui Judicatis Terram” or “Even-Handed Justice”, John Ruskin is seeking justice in the production and circulation of wealth. He compares the flow of wealth with that of flow of streams. As the water of a stream flows where the land descends, the wealth should go where it is needed, guided by the manners of human laws. He argues that wealth if flows in right direction can breed some more wealth (riches) and it can directly bring good to mankind. But if wealth is misused it can be harmful from any point of view. So a master should be cautious and just in calculating the wage of a labour, otherwise, underpayment or overpayment leads to misuse of wealth. So “the stream of justice will not dry up, but gather strength as it flows onward. And the nation with such a sense of justice will be happy and prosperous” (*Paraphrase* 23).

In the fourth essay “Ad Valorem”, John Ruskin states that true labour procreates wealth, and labour is that which produces useful materials and support human life. Many people amass wealth by giving good labour, but few people utilize wealth properly. They often hoard wealth. Ruskin concludes his last essay saying that misuse of wealth will lead to misery and he puts it as:

There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest

helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others. (*Unto This Last* 222)

John Ruskin's concept of wealth as delineated in *Unto This Last* had a deep impact on Mahatma Gandhi. He translated it into Gujarati in 1908 as *Sarvodaya*, meaning well-being of all. Gandhiji himself tried to follow the moral discourse of the essay in his life and invented the idea of 'Swaraj' or self-control. Following the ideologies of Ruskin, Gandhiji announced that real wealth lies in practicing morality in life. A large number of good citizens leading ethical lives are the real wealth or 'Swaraj' that a nation savours.

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