

Swami Vivekananda, Jamshedji Tata and the Indian Institute of Science. Tarun Goswami

It was sometime in the middle of July 1893. Two Indians, one a robust youth aged around 30 years and wearing a saffron attire with a turban usually worn by the Maharajas was found talking to a middle aged gentleman. It was a breezy, sunny afternoon and they were sitting on the deck of SS Empress of India which was on its way to Vancouver. They were so deeply engrossed in their conversation that they were unaware of what was happening around. The young monk was none other than Swami Vivekananda who was on his way to attend the World parliament of Religion which was to be held in Chicago and the aged person was Jamshedji Tata who was on a business trip to USA.

Swamiji and Jamshedji had visited a match manufacturing factory in Japan and were discussing about Japan's progress. Swamiji asked Jamshedji why did he instead of setting up his own match manufacturing factory in India was importing match from Japan as this meant draining out of national wealth and in return he got a meager commission. Setting up his own factory will not only increase his profit but at the same time will help Indian youths to get jobs. Swamiji in a letter to his younger brother Mahendranath Dutta had narrated his conversation with Jamshedji.

Jamshedji was amazed to see the burning spirit of this young man. His eye glittered when he talked about the oppression and torture inflicted by the British on his fellow Indians who did not get a square meal and did not have clothes to put on, education and shelter. Swamiji narrated his own experience which he gathered during his extensive tour in the country. He saw the indifference of the Maharajas and the educated people towards the poor and told Jamshedji that the real hope of India was from the masses. The masses should be given education and food to make India self reliant. Though the young monk was 16 years junior to Jamshedji he developed affection and respect for him and many years later told Sister Nivedita that when Swamiji was in Japan everyone who saw him was immediately struck by his likeness to Buddha. Swamiji and Jamshedji got down at the Vancouver port shook hands and bade good bye.

On 11 September, 1893 Swamiji addressed the World Parliament of Religions and created history. He became the central figure at the Parliament. Referring to his speeches New York Herald remarked "It was human eloquence at its highest pitch." Another newspaper wrote, "After listening him we find how foolish it is to send missionaries to his country." From United States Swamiji went England giving lectures and holding classes on Vedanta. The classes became so popular that it became difficult for the organizers to accommodate the ever inquisitive audience. Swamiji came back to India in 1897. People felicitated him and removed the horses from the carriage and drove them. Swamiji lectured in south India and came back to Calcutta. Jamshedji who was in Bombay must have been very happy at the success of his old friend.

On 23 November, 1898, Jamshedji wrote a letter to Vivekananda and requested him to write a pamphlet to arouse the Indians to study science. "I very much recall at this moment your views on the growth of ascetic spirit in India, and the duty, not of destroying, but of diverting it with useful channels. In connection with my Research Institute of Science for India it seems to me that no better use can be made of the ascetic spirit than the establishment of monasteries or residential halls for men dominated by this spirit, where they should live with ordinary decency, and devote their lives to the cultivation of sciences- natural and humanistic. I am of opinion that, if such a crusade in favour of an asceticism of this kind were undertaken by a competent leader, it would greatly help asceticism, science and the good name of our common country; and I know not who would make a more fitting general of such a campaign than Vivekananda. Do you think you would care to apply yourself to the mission of galvanizing into life our traditions in this respect? Perhaps you had better begin

with a fiery pamphlet rousing our people in this matter. I should cheerfully defray all the expenses of publication.”

But Tata's hope was shattered when he and Burjori Jampji Padshah met Lord Curzon on 31 December, 1898, barely a day after his arrival in India. Curzon right away rejected the proposal to set up an institute where philosophy, metaphysics, psychology and ethics would be taught along with natural science and biological science. He said he was not sure of the steady flow of students at the institute. He also questioned where those who pass out from this institute would get jobs in India. He further maintained that there was no competent teacher to guide the students.

Jamshedji's project thus becoming bleaker and bleaker everyday. He became frustrated as he thought that his mission was coming to an end. He sent Padshah and his sister to Calcutta to meet Swamiji and take his advice in the matter. They talked on the issue. Shortly after this meeting, Prabuddha Bharat, Ramakrishna Mission's English mouthpiece wrote an editorial in April 1899. Mission fully supported the move taken up by Jamshedji going against the wishes of the British government. The editorial supporting the move read, “ We are not aware if any project at once so opportune and so far reaching in its beneficent effects was even mooted in India, as that of the Post Graduate Research University of the Tata. The scheme grasps the vital point of weakness in our national well being with a clearness of vision and tightness of grip, the masterliness of which is only equal by the munificence of the gift with which it is ushered to the public..... If India is to live and prosper and if there is to be an Indian nation which will have its place in the ranks of the great nations of the world, the food question must be solved first of all. And in these days of keen competition it can only be solved by letting the light of modern science penetrate every pore of the two giant feeders of mankind- agriculture and commerce.... We repeat: no idea more potent for the good of the whole nation has seen the light of the day in modern India. Let the whole nation therefore, forgetful of class or sect or interests join in making it a success.”

Meanwhile, some newspapers in the country started articles saying that the whole venture of Jamshedji was nothing but to make money. Sister Nivedita opposed this and wrote several articles in The Statesman. He wrote letters in The Statesman urging people particularly the intellectuals to support Tata's move as it will make India self reliant in scientific research.

In 1900, the British government appointed Sir William Ramsay to go through Tata's proposal. Ramsay's remarks virtually echoed Curzon's observation. It also shot down the proposal to set up departments of Philosophy and Education in a Science university. With this the move taken up by Jamshedji came to a halt.

In 1900 Swami Vivekananda left for West for the second time and he was accompanied by Swami Turiyananda and Sister Nivedita. Nivedita was a popular teacher in Wimbledon and as she was the secretary of Seaside Club had contacts with the intellectuals and important persons in England. Nivedita knew that it was her guru's desire to set up an institute in India to carry on research in Science and Biology. So, she along with Ole Sera Bull, one of Vivekananda's disciple and a leader of women liberation movement in USA organized a gathering in England and invited Sir George Birwood, an important person in the Education department. After talking on the British education policy in India, Nivedita raised Jamshedji's proposal to set up a research institute in India. Birwood immediately rejected the proposal saying that it was not possible for the Indians to run such an institute. He argued that the universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras are in bad shape and in the past 50 years Calcutta university had failed to produce even a single outstanding student. Nivedita could not take it and told him that all these universities are controlled by the British government and it was the failure of the government to run them properly. She then told Birwood that Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose who had presented an outstanding paper at the Science Congress in Paris held was a product of Calcutta University. She also reminded him that the Royal Society had thrown open its gate to Bose and allowed him to use its library

during the Christmas holiday. Bose was then touring in England and Nivedita thought it would be excellent to appoint him as the head of the research institute and can carry on with his experiments freely without the intervention of the government. Also, Swamiji liked Bose and lauded him for his famous speech at the Paris Science Congress. Birwood never thought that an English lady would oppose him so vehemently and advised that it would be best if Jamshedji handed over the money to Sir Ramsay to run the institute.

Though discussion with Birwood failed to yield any favourable response, Nivedita did not give it up and wrote letters to educationists and intellectuals requesting them to comment on Jamshedji's proposal.

William James, the celebrated Psychologist supported Tata's ideas and wrote "----- with regard to Mr Tata's scheme for promoting higher education in India, I am of the opinion that for the attainment of his object he would do well to be guided by the best educated---- on the permanent governing bodies of the institution, the four communities--- Parsi, Mohammadan, Hindu and European ought always to be equally represented, no one in excess of any other--- the management ought to be conducted entirely on national lines, all guarantees being now secured that native students to distinguish themselves in scientific studies , and to hold the higher posts in the Institution."

There were replies from the intellectuals who all supported Tata's proposal. Patrick Geddes, the famous town planner, biologist and educationist who later wrote a biography of Jagadish Chandra Bose wrote to Nivedita congratulating Jamshedji. " Utilize all that is best in Europe, but do so by the help of all the best in India, not by abandoning it. Your new school of Science would thus acquire an individuality and an interest of its own," observed Geddes. Interestingly, Geddes had written five letters to Nivedita expressing his views.

The effort of Nivedita kindled a new hope in Jamshedji's mind. In 1901 he invited Swami Vivekananda to Bombay through Josephine Macleod, one of Swamiji's disciples. On 17 February Swamiji wrote a letter to Joe that read " I am so glad you saw Mr Tata and find him so strong and good. I will, of course , accept an invitation if I am strong enough to go to Bombay." Swamiji, however, could not go to Bombay because of ill health and Jamshedji's dream to see his friend remained unfulfilled. Prabuddha Bharat in its edition in march 1901 made an editorial comment that read, " It would be an exceedingly happy arrangement if the Tata Research University scheme could be combined along along with other schemes for memorials, for the princely gift of the Parsi patriot fully deserves that honour of being associated with Her Majesty's Memorial."

The pressure on the British government to clear Jamshedji's proposal was mounting both in India and abroad. Swamiji died in July 1902 and Jamshedji died in February 1907. The British government cleared the proposal in 1905. In 1907, Maharaja of Mysore, a devotee of Swami Vivekananda gave the land to fulfill his guru's dream. The formal vesting was issued in May, 1909.

Today the Indian Institute of Science, a premier organization in research stand on 800 acres of land in Bangalore. It is still referred to as the Tata institute. This a humble homage to two great personalities --- Swami Vivekananda and Jamshedji Tata who wanted India to be self reliant in research. After six decades of Independence the Indian government has failed to stop brain drain and an insignificant amount in the Union Budget is spent to carry out research activities in basic science in the country making it self reliant in research activities.

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