

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND INDIAN RENAISSANCE

By SWAMI TAPASYANANDA

[Swami Tapasyananda is the Head of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Trivandrum, Kerala. In this comprehensive article, he describes the condition in which India was at the time of Swami Vivekananda's advent and tells how his appearance made a vital contribution towards the national revival, which, as we see, is yet in progress and so still needs the inspiration of the Swami.]

In pre-independent days, the Indian mind was always accustomed to identify patriotism with political action. There was probably much justification for this identification at that time, as the struggle against British imperialism was considered to be the main patriotic duty of all Indians. The lingering memory of that tradition seems to be unconsciously persisting in the nation's mind even today, although the circumstances that justified this identification have passed. This apotheosis of politics has resulted, as its corollary, in an unconscious, and unhealthy, tendency to forget the need of the vitalizing influence of the patriotic sentiment in other fields of life. In fact, many of the national problems that face us today can be solved only when the nation recognizes that the leavening and stimulating influence of patriotism is no less needed in the educational, scientific, industrial, administrative, religious, and other fields of life than in the political field.

The special importance of Swami Vivekananda to the national life of India today lies in the fact that, in him, we find an ideal of patriotism of the highest order without any connection with political action or with political organizations. In fact, he lived at a time when political unrest and agitation had not started in this country. The national life of India was then dominated by a sense of dismay and inferiority arising from military defeat and political subjection by Western powers. Indians of that generation were therefore doubtful of the essential soundness of the very foundations of their ancient culture; for, if these were sound, why should the

structure of empires and social organizations based on them crumble to pieces so easily before the might of the young nations from far off West? This questioning led to a displacement of national pride and self-confidence by a base spirit of imitation of the West and an uncritical admiration for all that came from that quarter. From military and political suppression India was rapidly heading towards utter spiritual defeat and death. Swami Vivekananda was the mighty spirit that cried halt to this process of decline and degeneration, and by restoring self-confidence and generating a fresh hope and faith, started the country on a new career of resurgence that gradually culminated in the national movement and the attainment of political independence.

How did he achieve this? If we study his life, we find that the secret of his greatness lies in his uncompromising championship of the spiritual ideal of India and his fervent patriotism centering round this ideal. He was not a political leader with any party backing, but only a *parivrājaka*, a Hindu *sannyāsīn* and ascetic. He was, no doubt, educated in a modern university and had imbibed deeply the scientific and critical spirit of the West. But his secular education was supplemented by his discipleship under his divine teacher, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who embodied in himself the whole of Indian spiritual tradition. Discipleship under him consisted in practising the spiritual disciplines developed by the sages of India for overcoming the barriers of the body and the mind, and attaining intuitive experience of the universal Spirit, which is the origin and

support of everything. The culture of India holds the development of this intuitive experience as the ultimate purpose of life and considers all other values as only subservient to it. As against the criticisms of Indian culture for all its failings at the social and political level that the Westernized intelligentsia of the time were making, the life of Ramakrishna stood as a silent but powerful rejoinder and as a vindication of the essential truth and soundness of the basic values of Indian culture mentioned above. Before he met his great Master, Swami Vivekananda, too, had in his early youth imbibed the Westernized outlook of the intelligentsia and developed into a powerful critic of Indian society and ways of life. But symbolic, as it were, of the future turn of thought, the impact of Ramakrishna on the mind of Vivekananda, the young talented representative of modern India, produced a complete revolution in the cultural outlook of the latter. Vivekananda realized that, in India's ideals of devotion, renunciation, knowledge, and realization, one found the high watermark of human culture and that these formed the only secure foundation of an enduring civilization. He recognized that, in so far as India still remained true to them and could produce men of the calibre of Ramakrishna even in the midst of her political and economic downfall, her soul must be intact and full of vigour and vitality, and that, so long as she remained spiritually undefeated, her revival and readjustment to the conditions of the modern scientific age were only a question of time and wise leadership. As a confirmation, as it were, of the lesson he learnt at the feet of his Master, came to him the intimate experience of the physical and mental life of India at all its social levels—from the peasants in the fields to the Maharajas in the palaces, from the wild tribes in hills to the sophisticated minds of Westernized Indian cities—during a decade of wandering from the Himalayas to Kanya Kumari as a *parivrajaka*. These experiences of the spiritual India in

the Master, in the people, and in the intuition of his own soul, filled him with a passionate love for the land and its culture, with a conviction of its undying vitality and its important role in shaping the future of mankind.

It was thus, with his spirit expanded, intensified, and inspired by a burning faith in the past and future of India, with a Messianic fervour radiating from his transfigured personality, that Swami Vivekananda, the unknown monk, burst all of a sudden on the world platform when he appeared at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893.

The past generation of Indians, as also those of us who could recreate the history of those days in our minds, could feel the thrill of patriotic pride when this young Indian, standing unambiguously and uncompromisingly for the Indian outlook on life, received the ovation of the powerful and prosperous West at the very start of his memorable speech at the Parliament of Religions, wherein he addressed the audience as 'Sisters and Brothers of America'. The triumph of the Swami at the Parliament of Religions and, in his subsequent life, as an interpreter of Indian thought to the West, was a landmark in the cultural history of this land. It demonstrated to the Indian of those times that the 4000 years of his national history was not a movement in the false direction, that his culture and institutions were not the lifeless fossils that they were interpreted to be by his foreign conquerors, and that, if these were expressed in life and properly expounded as the Swami did, they were vital enough to initiate a new renaissance in human society. Thus the Swami restored to India the faith that she had lost in herself and her destiny. From being a mere suppliant at the door of the great nations, he awakened her to a consciousness of her essential role in world history as the spiritual teacher of mankind. The sense of a national destiny and confidence in the power of a people and their tradition are the essential requisites of a national revival, and in so far as Swami Vivekananda's

appearance made a vital contribution in this direction, it was as important an event in the development of Indian nationalism as the Dandi March, the Quit India Campaign, and the achievement of Indian Independence.

The rest of his life was spent in interpreting the spiritual ideals of India in the context of modern life, and in inspiring his countrymen with that love of India of which he himself was an embodiment. From one end of the country to the other he travelled exhorting the people of India to a new gospel in which the traditional spiritual values of the land mingled with an intense patriotic spirit. 'For the next fifty years', he declared, 'this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Motherland, India. Let all other vain gods disappear for that time from our minds. This is the only God that is awake, our own race, everywhere His hands, everywhere His feet, everywhere His ears, He covers everything. . . . What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the God that we see all around us, the Virāt? When we have worshipped this, we shall be able to worship all other gods. . . . What is needed is *citta-suddhi*, purification of the heart; and how does that come? Through worship. And the first of all worship is the worship of the Virāt—of all these around us.' Thus did he link worship, the central ideal of all religions, with his patriotic gospel.

The nationalism he preached was not, however, of the chauvinistic type which declares, 'My country right or wrong', but one which aims at the good of all through India's good. His study of world history had convinced him that each nation or culture had one theme, one central note, round which its life was organized and which formed its special contribution to the sum total of human culture and achievement. When any nation transgressed from its national ideal and ceased to fulfil any special purpose in the life of the world as a whole, it perished in course of time, and nature eliminated it from the face of the earth. That was what had

happened to all the ancient nations of the world except India where society has more than 4000 years of continuous history. And India has been an exception to this rule only because she has still the vitality to play her part in world history, that being the contribution of spiritual insight and guidance to mankind. According to him, the special genius of the Indian people lies in their aptitude to actualize the truth of God and Ātman and to order the physical life on the basis of this realization. All epochs of national revival and cultural expansion in India have been preceded or accompanied by the appearance of great spiritual personalities and a general rise in the standard of the spiritual life of the people, and the material developments were only the off-shoots of it. The Swami, therefore, emphasized always that, if India is really to rise to a high status among the nations of the world, it will not be sufficient for her to imitate and re-echo the political and economic ideologies of the English, the Americans, or the Russians. While we have to learn the material sciences and the principles of technology and organization from the nations of the West, we must continue to have a firm hold on the spiritual ideals inculcated in the *Gṛthā* and the Upaniṣads. The teachings contained in these great spiritual texts are the universal principles relating to the inner growth of man, and are thus to be distinguished from dogmatic theologies and creedal religions of organized churches and traditions. There is nothing incompatible in them with the teachings of science and with the modern ways of social and industrial organization. To lose sight of these spiritual values in the pursuit of wealth and material glories and to live in complete disregard of the spiritual foundations of life, will be the denial of India's past and the stepping stone to her destruction as a cultural entity.

The Swami's defence of India's past should not, however, be interpreted to mean that he had any sympathy for that mentality, born

of false pride, which indulges in boastful and sentimental claims of bygone glories as a compensation for present downfall and degradation. Thinking on the past is beneficial only as a spring-board for the future, never as an opiate for deadening higher aspirations and efforts. He recognized that man in the West has effected a revolution in life through the discoveries of science and its application to human well-being. In the attainment of power, in the creation of wealth, and in the amelioration of suffering, the contributions of modern science have to be reckoned as unparalleled. It is also science and its application to production and communication that have made the modern industrial civilization possible, giving a chance to the common man to assert his manhood and be something more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. These achievements of the modern spirit were given full recognition by Swami Vivekananda, and he wanted India of his times, just emerging from pre-scientific and medieval conditions of life, to participate fully in the achievements and aspirations of the new age. He even envisaged the idea of a monastic order devoted entirely to scientific research; he dreamed of a time when machines would take up all work involving tiring drudgery and leave man sufficient leisure for higher pursuits. So great was his faith in science and its possibilities. But he knew also the limitations of science—that it puts only power into the hands of man and not wisdom, that it imparts knowledge of nature, but not love for one's fellow beings, that it enlightens us on the mechanism of nature, but gives no insight into its mystery. He felt that spiritual insight alone could ennoble and expand the heart of man. It is only in the encounter with God that the noblest part in him is enkindled. Without this consciousness of the divine spark in him, the power which science has armed him with will only make him an exalted animal with unlimited powers of destruction. It was the conviction of Swami Vivekananda that the ancient heritage of

India could alone supplement the world civilization with what it is lacking in the spiritual field, and it was for this reason that he reminded Indians of that heritage of which they were the custodians. In his eyes, therefore, Indians would be but throwing away the baby with the bath, if they abandoned that part of the heritage, too, in an indiscriminate flair for modernity and in a rapid process of readjustment to the new situation brought about by the industrial age.

It was not only in the matter of pursuing science and applying it to life that the Swami was modern, but also in his sympathy for the social aspirations of the new age. He never exhorted his countrymen to go back to the Vedic times, but asked them to march in the vanguard of progress. Today, Indian leaders are speaking of the socialistic pattern of society. Swami Vivekananda spoke of it as the ideal for his country more than sixty years back. He declared he was a socialist, not because socialism was perfect, but because all other forms of social organizations had been tried and found miserably wanting, and it was therefore worthwhile trying the new social ideal. He felt that the weakness of India lay not in its want of talents, but in the terrible backwardness of its masses, and that, unless they were educated, enriched, and made self-conscious, the Indian nation cannot rise.

The Swami declared that his mission in life was to endeavour to restore what he called 'manhood' to the people of India. By this he meant that neither by mere indulgence in thoughts over past glories, nor by base imitation of the West and uncritical acceptance of all that came from that quarter, neither by a mere gospel of asceticism exalting poverty, nor by exclusive pursuit of material prosperity and an increasing standard of life, can the national life of India be resuscitated. India must grow strong, and real strength will come only when India becomes spiritually self-conscious while simultaneously improving her material condition by the application of science and modern technology.