

THE MISSION OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA*

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My Dear Friends,

Why is it that India survives through the centuries, through the ages, when many other great civilisations that have arisen, in the long and tortuous course of human history, have fallen by the wayside? There have been other great civilisations; there was Greece, and Rome, there was Babylon, there was the great civilisation of Central and South America. But today those civilisations live on only in their ruins, or in the four walls of museums or in the minds of scholars. But India, despite a million shocks and a million tribulations, despite upheavals that would have shattered many a lesser civilisation, continues to retain its living and glorious link with the very dawn of History. What is the reason for this? It seems to me, looking back on the long vista of Indian History, that the main reason is that whenever the light in this country has threatened to go out, whenever dark clouds of ignorance or disaster have gathered menacingly over India, there have always been born great men and women who have rekindled the light and the hope of this nation. This is true not only in the dark depths of that Ashtami when Sri Krishna was born amidst the terror and the horror of Kamsa's reign; but also throughout the long vista, a Buddha is born, a Shankara is born, great saints and devotees are born in different parts of the country. And at the very moment when it appears that once and for all India is going to be extinguished these people come, they reilluminate our minds. They rekindle that Eternal Faith that has been burning in India ever since the dawn of our history. I think that you will agree that this is the main reason why India has survived while all other great civilisations of the world have shattered and fallen by the wayside.

One such moment in India's history was in the middle of the 19th century. After 1857, the last spark of resistance to alien rule had been stamped out. And India lay crushed and broken at the feet of her foreign conquerors. At that time, it was a subjugation, not merely political or military, but even more so, spiritual and intellectual. India had begun to lose, not only to lose faith in herself, but to decry her own past and her own tradition. There was an intellectual and spiritual void in this country. And it appeared that after surviving for so many thousands of years India was at last ready to fall and to pass on into the history of ruined civilisations.

But what happened again in the 19th century? As you are aware, at that very moment, when the night was the darkest, at that very moment when there seemed to be no hope whatsoever for a revival, a resurgence, in fact, began. And that resurgence, as you are aware, began first in Bengal, which was the province where the British first conquered, the province which felt the impact of British rule earlier than the rest of India. It is a magnificent story, the story of the Indian Renaissance, beginning with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founding of the Brahmo Samaj, later the Adi Brahmo Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj of India, led by Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen, then the founding of the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra by Ranade and Bandarkar, then the founding of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab by that human dynamo, Dayananda Saraswati, and so on, a number of reform movements spread across the country.

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The Theosophical Society also did a great deal to bring about a resurgence in ourselves. But, all these, in a way, were peripheral to the mainstream of Hindu Thought and Hindu Tradition. A real revolution in this country required a revolution in the centre. A revolution merely in the periphery was not enough. And this revolution took place, revolved around one of the greatest men that the world has ever known, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

It was an astounding phenomenon, how Sri Ramakrishna, an untutored, unlettered person from a village came to Calcutta and became a spiritual beacon for millions, how by the force of his unique Sadhana, his unique Siddhi, he was able to attract to his feet the greatest intellectuals and the greatest politicians of the day and how Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar became a flaming beacon of Light and Hope in the midst of the darkness that at that time pervaded India. It is a fascinating story, this of Sri Ramakrishna, into which I will not today go. I am sure all of you are aware of it. But the point that I wish to make is that Sri Ramakrishna represented a new Spiritual Resurgence in this country. And among the many great and humble people that he attracted to his feet was one Narendranath Datta, who was later to become famous the world over as Swami Vivekananda.

Swamiji's life was a brief one. He lived for only 39 years. And yet what a magnificent achievement there was in this short period! His life is exciting and interesting: his early boyhood, his meeting with the Master, his discipleship, then after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, his wandering the length and breadth of India mingling with princes and with paupers and getting an idea of the requirements and the needs of this nation, then his historic triumph in the West, the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which by the sheer force of his personality he was able to dominate, and then further, his work in the USA and in England, his triumphant return to India, his lectures from Kanya-

kumari to Kashmir which inspired and revived this nation, his founding and consecration of the Belur Math and finally his passing away, his Maha Samadhi, in 1902, leaving behind him a glorious, and a unique chapter in the history of India.

Swami Vivekananda achieved in a very short span of time a virtual restatement of Hinduism to meet the requirements of his age. As I have said earlier, this restating of eternal truths has been the key to the continuance and the subsistence of India. The truths remain the same because they are Eternal. If there is a spiritual truth, it cannot change from age to age or from time to time. But what can change and what does change is the statement of that truth, the presentation of that truth, to meet the requirements of different eras. And Swami Vivekananda, almost single-handed, was able to achieve a complete restatement of Hinduism to meet the requirements at the end of the 19th century. And his message was to a very large extent responsible for bringing about a resurgence which took various shapes, including the great political movement. Today his message is needed more than ever before; because today, although we have achieved political freedom, we are nevertheless again facing an intellectual and spiritual void. The old is breaking, and passing away never to return, the new is yet to be born and our generation finds itself precariously poised between these two, groping for a new integration, groping for a new vision, for a new way of integrating the problems that face us. At a time like this, I think the message of Swami Vivekananda can be extremely valuable, extremely useful, to us. And therefore this morning I will try and place before you, as I see them, some of the salient features of Swamiji's teachings.

Swamiji once wrote that his ideal can be put into a few words. And that is to preach unto mankind their divinity and how to make it manifest in every moment of life. This was his basic message. There are many facets of his teachings. I think the first is the Unity of all Religions. Not merely a

tolerance of religions — I would like to make this point, because a tolerance is essentially a negative attitude. A tolerance merely means the absence of opposition. That is not what he preached. His was a positive acceptance of the unity of all religions. He was preaching the old Rig Vedic dictum :

एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

Or the Mundaka Upanishad :

यथा नद्यः स्यन्दमानाः समुद्रेऽस्तं गच्छन्ति नाम
रूपे विहाय ।

तथा विद्वान् नाम रूपाद्विमुक्तः परात्परं पुरुष
मुपैति दिव्यम् ॥

As streams arising from different parts of the country find their way ultimately to the same ocean, so do the various religions that have arisen here and throughout the world lead ultimately to the same Spiritual Goal.

This was something that Swamiji taught, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but, born out of deep conviction and deep realization, because you will recall that Sri Ramakrishna in the course of his unique Sadhana had actually experienced the unity of various religions. He had lived for several days as a Mussalman and had had a vision of a divine personage who, he thought, was the Prophet of Islam. He had lived as a Christian and had a vision of the Christ of Christianity. And so the Unity of religions preached by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda was not merely something that is politically advantageous just because we happen to have a lot of non-Hindus in this country (that is the way in which many people preach secularism today). That was not their secularism. It was a glowing and dynamic unity of Religions. And I think that this is something, which today we must once again realise. All too often, we take what we call a secular stance because we feel that it is politically necessary to do so. Politically, India is inhabited, apart from the Hindus, by many crores of Mussalmans, of

Christians, of Buddhists, of Sikhs, of Jains and so on. I do not think that is a correct attitude. There may be a narrow political advantage, but the real attitude is to accept the unity of the goal of all religions and this is to my mind one of the most important teachings of Swami Vivekananda.

The second aspect is the Divinity of Man. Now the Divinity of God is not a very novel concept, because, after all, if there is a God, he is bound to be divine. There is nothing very special about it. But what do the Vedas and the Upanishads preach us? They preach the Divinity of Man. The Upanishads have a wonderful term for the human race : अमृतस्यपुत्रा :— Children of Immortality. What an extraordinarily bold and powerful concept this is! That every human being born into this planet, whether he is rich or poor, whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim or is belonging to any other Faith, whether he is born in India or in the Antarctic or any other part of the world, he is a Child of Immortality! Immortality is his birthright. This is something which Swamiji always used to stress. And he always used to say that, it is not merely the rich, or people belonging to a community or caste that must be considered divine, but it is the entire mankind. And this concept of the Divinity of man, therefore, cuts across all creeds, cuts across all nationalities and embraces within its ambit the entire human race.

Closely flowing from this concept of the Divinity of Man is the dignity of the individual. Swamiji had a deep agony at the suffering that was present at that time in India. And he often used to say that religion is not for empty bellies ; that if you want a person to be religious, you must first of all feed him at least to the minimum necessary, you must clothe him, you must house him. Then only can you expect him to really start thinking about the things of the Spirit. Here again Western commentators often make a serious mistake. They think that Hinduism teaches poverty and renunciation and, therefore, there is no impetus, there is no incen-

tive to economic development. This is complete nonsense, if I may say so. The poverty that Hinduism teaches is a voluntary renunciation — is a poverty of a Buddha who gave everything up in order to become poor. It is not a hereditary poverty. It is not that every one should be born poor and, therefore, every one will get spiritual bliss. It all seems self-evident to us. But I have heard a number of Westerners, and even a number of Indians say, 'Look, Hinduism preaches poverty.' It is a voluntary poverty. And you cannot be voluntarily poor unless first of all you are rich. For a man who is born poor, for a beggar, there is no spiritual advantage in his poverty. Therefore Swami Vivekananda always used to stress the dignity of the individual. And this dignity of the individual cuts across all the ridiculous taboos and superstitions that went by the name of Hinduism at that time and that still to some extent deface and disfigure the features of India. For example, the whole question of untouchability. How can it be that if there is divinity in every man, by what reasoning, by what logic, by what intellectual gymnastics, it is possible for us to say that a certain person is untouchable and that by touching him or by allowing him into the temple you profane and you spoil the temple into which he enters? I think that there can be no greater aberration of the spirit of the Vedas and Upanishads other than this. And Swamiji used to say that if your religion is such a weak and paltry thing that it gets broken by touching, let it break; the sooner this sort of kitchen religion breaks and shatters to the ground, the sooner will India regain her strength and her pristine glory. This is something which Swamiji constantly preached. Again this ridiculous belief that existed at that time, of 'Prayaschitta'! There was a time in India when people went abroad and carried the message of India to the four corners of Asia; and then there came a time when if anybody went to England, before he was received back into his community, he had to go through this 'Prayaschitta' in order to

wash away the pollution that he was supposed to have gathered abroad. What greater contrast could there be between the bold, all-inclusive aspect of Hinduism and these narrow superstitions and dogmas that have defaced the name of Hinduism through the ages! So Swamiji thundered against these. He was the greatest critic of a great deal of what goes by the name of Hinduism; because anything that went against his concept of the dignity and divinity of the individual was anathema to him.

Following again from this is the whole concept of Service to Society. He did not merely believe in a personal salvation, up in the mountains of the Himalayas. But he felt that it is by Service of the Daridranarayana, by the Service of suffering humanity that one's personal Sadhana can also develop. And that is why he founded the Ramakrishna Mission which until this very day is performing extremely valuable service not only in India but throughout the world. Now this is a very important problem also, because there are many of us who are often tempted to leave the bustle, the heat and the struggle of active involvement and to go away into the beautiful calm of the Himalayas and to sit there and meditate upon the Eternal. I happen to come from the Himalayas incidentally and therefore I know perhaps more even than most of you in the audience the tremendous attraction that the mountains have. Unless you have lived in the Mountains, unless you have been born there and brought up there, it is difficult to appreciate the special quality, the special magnetism that the mountains have. And it is difficult, therefore, to appreciate the extent of the conflict that often arises between involvement and withdrawal. But Swamiji did a unique thing. He combined the intense activity of the West with the deep meditation of the East and he put before us a glowing synthesis of the two. He showed us that in order to achieve our own spiritual development it was not necessary to go out into the Himalayas; it was necessary rather to alleviate the suffering of the masses

of India. And this concept, I think, is as valid today, if not more, as it was when he first expounded it.

Then again, and this is also an important facet of his teaching—his deep and glowing love for India. When he swam across the small stretch of ocean at Kanyakumari and sat on the rock at the feet of Mother India where three oceans mingle and he looked up at this great and magnificent country that has nurtured our race for thousands of years, he had a vision of India that was reborn, spiritually, economically, politically, an India that was resurgent, an India in which the suffering and the misery of lakhs of people would be alleviated. an India, in which everybody would be proud to call himself an Indian. That was the vision that he saw. And that was the vision that throughout his lectures in the length and breadth of this country he tried to give to the people of India. Today, I think, that is required even more than before, because although we have achieved political freedom, we often find petty loyalties rising to the fore; petty regionalism and linguism and casteism and political schisms combine to shatter the unity of India that has been won after such great struggle and such great sacrifices. People talk of the North and the South and the East and the West and they talk of their own smaller loyalties, but how many people are there who talk of this glowing vision of a united and dynamic India that Swami Vivekananda put before us? I am not one of those who decry the importance of region or of language in our lives. Certainly it is there; it has its place, but its place is not a predominant one. Its place must be subordinated to the greater good of this nation of ours. Today, there are signs again that the vision of Swami Vivekananda is beginning to fade; there are signs that the unity of this great nation from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Dwaraka to Kamarupa is once again being threatened—this time not so much by an external enemy as by our own internal weaknesses and our own internal schisms. I think the vision that Swami Vivekananda had

of India requires to be reiterated again and again so that we can place before ourselves this ideal of a united India. And his vision even transcended India, because he was no mere narrow chauvinist. He felt that a free India had a duty not only to itself but also to the entire world community. All the great thinkers in India have felt that—Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo with his concept of evolutionary spiritualism and the concept that India has a special role to play in the development of the human race, and more lately Jawaharlal Nehru with his emancipated and wide Internationalism. This is a tradition that has been going on in India, because once you accept the divinity of the human race, you are ultimately not able to stop merely at India, because surely those living in Pakistan are also belonging to the same human race, and those living in China also. So despite our political differences, we have got to retain the concept of *वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्*, of the world as the single family, and we have got to press for it. And Swami Vivekananda thought that India has a special destiny in bringing about this world-consciousness.

And in order to achieve all this, what did Swamiji tell us to be? He told us to be strong—not the strength of the Asuras, not the strength of a Hitler or a Mao but the 'Daivic Shakti',—the strength of the spirit, the fearlessness, the *अमयत्ता*. Even the Upanishads say : *नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यः* The Atman is not to be attained by the weak. You cannot achieve anything in this life, whether it is material, or whether it is spiritual, if you are weak. So Swamiji taught the doctrine of spiritual strength, the doctrine that physically, intellectually and spiritually we have to be strong. We have got to be strong. Then only, if we are strong only, can we throw off the shackles of foreign rule, and the even more powerful and the more insidious shackle of our own weaknesses, of our own fears, because after all there is nobody and no power that can enslave us if we are free

within. This has been demonstrated again and again in the long course of Indian History. And Swamiji in his words of glowing wisdom and power said that if there is anything that makes you weak, it cannot be true. And he wrote at one place : ' And here is the test of truth — anything that makes you weak, physically, intellectually and spiritually reject as poison. There is no life in it, it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening.' This is what he taught. And this is particularly what our younger generation have got to learn. I see before me today several young people who are studying here. Swamiji used to say of the youth : We want young Indians with muscles of iron and nerves of steel. And if we wanted them, and if we needed them at the turn of the century, we need them even more today. And the young people in India can do no better than to derive inspiration from the glowing words that Swami Vivekananda preached to us. This to my mind then, my dear friends, is the message of Swami Vivekananda. This is the vision of that dynamic India. Today, we have got to live up to that.

Are we capable of fulfilling the vision that Swamiji saw, as was said just now ? It is not

merely enough to deliver lectures or to listen, unless we take a vow that we will try to realize the vision that Swamiji has laid before us. Today is the first of the year. It is as good a day as any for us to rededicate ourselves to the mission that Swami Vivekananda laid before us, the mission of building a new India. Certainly there will be difficulties. It is not an easy path. It is narrow. It is beset with dangers. It is sharp as a razor's edge. But without difficulties, nothing is achieved. And no nation can become great, no people can become great if they do not have within them the power and the wisdom to overcome all difficulties. And, therefore, I will conclude my talk this morning by repeating the great saying from *Kathopanishad* that Swami Vivekananda used to preach, the doctrine of power and wisdom :

उत्थिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान् निबोधत ।

क्षुरस्य धारा निशिता दुरत्यया दुर्गं पथस्तत्

कवयोवदन्ति ॥

Arise, awake, and learn by approaching the excellent ones. The wise ones describe that path to be as inaccessible as a razor's edge, which when sharpened is difficult to tread on.

ANECDOTES AND OBSERVATIONS — (Continued from page 444)

Hindu culture has always envisaged a close link between man and beast, between the voiced species and the voiceless but not unfeeling genus. The Rig Vedic Mantra which prays for the welfare of the humans adds in the same breath a longing for the prosperity of animals too :

Sanno astu dvipade śam catuspade

May prosperity abide by us, the bipeds. May the same attend on the quadrupeds.