

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

Swami Vivekananda: The Spiritual Inspiration for the National Movement

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It is with a sense of deep humility that I stand before you today to recall the deep wisdom, the indomitable spirit and the profound strength of character of one of the greatest souls that walked this earth—Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji taught us many things: he spoke and wrote extensively on philosophy and on religion, about universal love and on education, he championed the cause of the downtrodden and the marginalized, he spoke about the emancipation and the empowerment of women, and on multiple other subjects.

On 11 September 1893, Swami Vivekananda spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He said:

I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and nations of the earth.

Swami Vivekananda went on to say,

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.

He recited an ancient hymn to the august gathering that said, 'As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men may take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.'

Swami Vivekananda was a man of profound wisdom and vision. He believed in religious unity and in the harmony of all religions. He believed that it is important—indeed critically important—to have tolerance among the practitioners of different religious faiths. Indeed, at the closure of the World's Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda said, ' . . .if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him. . . .' What a profound visionary he was! His prophetic words on 11 September 1893 in the United States almost seem to suggest that he anticipated the events that would take place after a century on that fateful day in the United States, on 11 September 2001!

Swami Vivekananda was already a very well-known figure in India when he embarked on his visit to the West in 1893. He went to America as a simple sannyasin of India to explain to the people of the West the harmony of all religions and the universalism of the Vedic thoughts. He was not a politician but his visit turned out to be a turning point in our country's history because his personality and philosophy made a profound impact on the national movement which was then in its nascent stage. In grateful acknowledgement of the inspiration his life and message gave to the cause of national liberation and reconstruction, Subhash Chandra Bose hailed him as 'the spiritual father of India's national movement'. Let me quote what Netaji said about Swami Vivekananda:

His personality was rich, profound and complex and it was this personality—as distinct from his teachings and writings—which accounts for the wonderful influence he has exerted on his countrymenReckless in his sacrifice, unceasing in his activity, boundless in his love, profound and versatile in

his wisdom, exuberant in his emotions, merciless in his attacks but yet simple as a child—he was a rare personality in this world of ours. . . . A yogi of the highest spiritual level in direct communion with the truth who had for the time being consecrated his whole life to the moral and spiritual uplift of his nation and of humanity, that is how I would describe him. . . . The foundation of the present freedom movement owes its origin to Swamiji's message.

While we all remember Swamiji as a great exponent of Vedanta; a silver-tongued orator and a great authority on all the great religions of the world—not merely of Hinduism—and we admire him for his great integrity and courage to put across the truth about his religion, but very few today remember him as one who provided the spiritual inspiration for the national movement.

Spirituality as a source of inspiration

In order to understand the importance of spirituality as a source of inspiration for the national movement, we have to go back to the life and teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa which inspired the revival of spirituality as a powerful source which moved Indian society. Swami Ranganathananda sums up the contribution of Sri Ramakrishna most admirably in the following words:

What did Sri Ramakrishna do in his time? Apparently he did nothing. He lived a quiet life outside the political and social movements of his time. But the energies that he created and released from his inner life, powerfully influenced men and movements around him, and bid fair at the not too distant future, to transform the modern world itself. He lived the life of the spirit in all its intensity and extensity and showed the authenticity of man's spiritual life.

After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, his great disciple and interpreter of his philosophy, Swami Vivekananda took the process of spiritual revival to further heights. By telling the people that they would find strength, freedom and fearlessness in our ancient scriptures, he was explaining to them that the source of spiritual energy was already there in their own religion and they had only to discover these themselves. Swami Vivekananda's famous exhortation—'Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached'—was a stirring call to the Indians to discover their own strength. It came at a time when people appeared to have lost faith and resigned to a mood of dejection and defeatism. The role of Swamiji as a spiritual father of India's national movement was underlined by C. Rajagopalachari. This was how he summed up Swamiji's contribution—'Swami Vivekananda saved Hinduism and saved India. But for him we would have lost our religion and would not have gained our freedom'.

Seeds of mistrust

It is a curious coincidence that the terrorist attacks on the US took place on 11 September 2001 which has now come to be known as 9 / 11. Following the attacks, the developments have been such that many say that the world would never be the same again. One of the saddest consequences of 9 / 11 was that the terrible seeds of mistrust were not only sown but they have, in a short span of time, taken deep roots. Today, in Europe and in North America, there is fear in the eyes of people when they view a stranger. Europe and the United States were known for their liberal values and their openness to 'other cultures' and yet, what we see today is a sort of almost paranoid apprehension of the unfamiliar and the unknown. This has led them to seek a sort of false protection through insulation. In my mind, this kind of insulation can only be described as 'intolerance' and that is a very sad and unhappy development, especially in an age of rapid globalization. In very simple, perhaps even simplistic terms, globalization is a process through which national borders become fuzzy and irrelevant, as all the inhabitants strive to become 'world citizens'. Can we ever achieve this through intolerance? Can we hope to achieve this if we are governed by fear of 'the other' and the unknown? I do not think so.

All of us are different. We speak different languages, we worship different gods, we dress differently, we even eat different kinds of food. It is this diversity that makes the world so fascinating and so

interesting. But, one can only find the world interesting and fascinating if one is tolerant. It is, therefore, all the more distressing when Islam is today a matter of debate not so much as a unique philosophy and as one of the world's great religions but because of a perceived link with terrorism. Till this attitude is shunned, we will only stand diminished and captive to the poverty of thought and driven by the bigotry that fosters communalism.

Yesterday, we celebrated the sixty-first anniversary of our independence. Freedom from colonial and foreign rule is only one small step towards genuine freedom. Genuine freedom comes from a plural and secular ethos, from development, from the uplift of the marginalized and the downtrodden, from the empowerment of our women. Genuine freedom would be attained when we have freedom from poverty and hunger, from religious bigotry and communal feelings. I am convinced that it is possible to achieve this and more. But, all of us need to work together to achieve this common goal and objective. It will not do for us to say, 'This is not my job. This is someone else's responsibility.' What is India, if she is not ours? And so, we all need to work together and work hard for the India of our dreams. I take this opportunity, therefore, of appealing to each and everyone of you gathered here, and especially to the younger generation to remember that the time has come for all of us to redeem our pledge to the nation, to our national flag, to the legacy of all the great saints on whose sayings and philosophy the edifice of India is built, and to our people. The time has come for us to take pride in India and in her people. If we do not come forward as a nation to fight injustice and poverty, generations that will come will only stand up and say to us: 'You have let us down, you have failed us!' Let that not be our epitaph!

* Sri Pranab Mukherjee, Hon'ble Minister for External Affairs, Government of India, delivered this Special Lecture at the Institute on 16 August 2008.