

Swami Vivekananda: An Honour to Humanity

Swami Sandarshananda

Swami Vivekananda's guru recognizes him to be a highly evolved soul the moment he sets his eyes on him for the first time. It happens absolutely in compliance with the scriptural saying that a perfect guru knows a perfect disciple at the first sight. Therefore, whatever Sri Ramakrishna foresees about him using his spiritual insight comes true. Sri Aurobindo appropriately remarks:

It was in religion first that the soul of India awoke and triumphed. There were always indications, always great forerunners, but it was when the flower of the educated youth of Calcutta bowed down at the feet of an illiterate Hindu ascetic, a self-illuminated ecstatic and 'mystic' without a single trace or touch of the alien thought or education upon him that the battle was won. The going forth of Vivekananda, marked out by the Master as the heroic soul destined to take the world between his two hands and change it, was the first visible sign to the world that India was awake not only to survive but to conquer.

Bepin Chandra Pal also perceived their wonderful Master-disciple relationship in a similar manner. He says, 'Paramahansa Ramakrishna saw into the innermost composition of Vivekananda's nature and spirit and recognized in him a fit instrument for delivering the message of his own life.' Pal had deep respect for both and tried to study their tacit agreement. He could see that Swamiji 'clothed' his guru's realizations 'in the language of modern Humanism'. He thought that there was an inexplicable element between them because of which the 'miracle' of 'conversion' of Vivekananda, 'a rationalist and a deist', had 'happened'. He felt Sri Ramakrishna 'was a simple seer' who 'believed in what he saw', and Vivekananda 'indissolubly bound up with his Master.' Giving an interpretation to such a view, Pal further says:

Vivekananda felt drawn to his Master by what he hardly knew. It was the operation of what is now called soul-force. When one soul touches another on this deep spiritual plane, the two are united for ever by unbreakable spiritual bonds. The two henceforth become practically one; the Master working in and through the disciple, the disciple not even knowing that he is dancing to the tune of the Master.

As a youth, Swamiji was far too advanced for his age. He left the marks of his maturity on everyone he then came in contact with. Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, friend of his salad days, enjoyed 'much merry-making' and 'spent hours in talks and conversations' with him. He discovered 'a lion's strength' in his soul and 'a volcanic pain and passion for India' in his heart. A patriot to the core, Upadhyay had 'come to follow' his 'way' in the midst of 'fierce struggle' and 'despondency'. He looked to 'the great ideal' set forth by him. Charged by Swamiji's influence, he went to England to spread the message of the Vedanta. Since its result was 'profound' and 'like a dream' for 'an ordinary man', that he thought he was, he attributed its success to Swamiji in these glowing words: 'All these were miracles brought about by the inspiration and power of Vivekananda behind me—this is what I believe. That is why sometimes I think, who is Vivekananda? The greatness of Vivekananda surpasses my power of assessment as I think of the stupendous programme of work he has boldly initiated.' Swamiji's death cut into his heart as a 'razor' would do, he said.

By virtue of the teachings of his exceptional preceptor, Vivekananda realized God in all beings. His heart limitlessly expanded as a result of his intense spiritual exercise. During his itinerant days he saw a great multitude of people in utter ignorance and poverty which led him to take the resolution that he would work for the poor and the downtrodden. He by chance came upon one of his brother disciples in

the Mount Abu. Of this meeting, Swami Turiyananda said afterwards:

I vividly remember some remarks made by Swamiji at that time. The exact words and accents, and the deep pathos, with which they were uttered, still ring in my ears. He said, 'Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion.' Then with an expression of deep sorrow on his countenance and intense emotion shaking his body, he placed his hand on his heart and added, 'But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.' His voice was choked with feeling; he could say no more. For a time profound silence reigned, and tears rolled down his cheeks.

A careful search reveals the fact that Swamiji was basically bent upon looking for a means to eradicate poverty and ignorance. He gave a sincere call to youths to come forward and work for its cause. To quote him: 'Then only will India awake, when hundreds of large-hearted men and women, giving up all desires of enjoying the luxuries of life, will long and exert themselves to their utmost for the well-being of the millions of their countrymen who are gradually sinking lower and lower in the vortex of destitution and ignorance.' His words are still relevant, for, by and large, the general view now is that in spite of excellent economic progress, the condition of the poor and backward has not yet altered. No other method than the one Swamiji suggests is likely to reduce the glaring gap between the wealthy and the penurious while many sophisticated means implemented for the purpose are proving useless.

Swamiji discovered that his guru was correct when he indicated 'Education' as the ultimate remedy. But it took a while for him to understand its implications to be able to accept 'Education' as 'panacea' and apply it for the welfare of society. He was conscious that the 'disciples of all the prophets have always inextricably mixed up the ideas of the Master with the person.' He therefore took time and thoroughly examined everything whatever he heard from him. In consequence, he could catch the ring of pragmatism behind each word Sri Ramakrishna uttered. He was clear that none would be able to assimilate Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual message unless there was enough strength in mind. Sri Ramakrishna was happy to observe Swamiji behaving that way because he believed that conviction necessitated argumentation.

Swamiji realized that it was not in the capacity of the weak to grapple with the dire challenges of life. Unless there is self development and manifestation of inner power, he believed, there is hardly any real progress. Keeping this in mind, he redefined and used education with a view to unfolding the potential within. Learning must go hand in hand with moral and spiritual development. For knowledge is not about earning bread and butter alone; it is about emancipation from ignorance also. A perfect combination of the two makes life worth living. Swamiji wanted to awaken the nation with a spirit of service, making education its effective tool. He perhaps expected that people would emulate his example of dedicated service and love for the masses. He proclaimed: 'May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls; and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, is the special object of my worship.'

The effect of Swamiji's effort was visible everywhere in the country, especially in the organization he had established. He started a youth movement through it, which grew from strength to strength. There was a continuous flow of educated young people in it who came and joined leaving hearth and home. The work it has done since its inception in 1897 is worth mentioning, but it requires an exclusive treatment to present the accounts of its large contribution over a period of a century and a decade now.

Countless young people responded to his call with alacrity and exerted to releasing the country from foreign domination, for which he had to incur the displeasure of the British Government. He raised his voice for a comprehensive regeneration, taking intellectual, spiritual, educational, health and economic matters into consideration. It is evident from the alluded words of Aurobindo that he earned the confidence of his countrymen, and specially influenced the youth. Aurobindo says: 'We perceive his influence still working gigantically, we know not well how, we know not well where, in something that is not yet formed, something leonine, grand, intuitive, upheaving that has entered the soul of India. . . .' He sincerely believed that the visit of Swamiji 'to America and the subsequent work of those who followed him did more for India than a hundred London Congresses could effect.'

The momentum Swamiji was able to put in the thought of the people regarding poverty yielded results in the post-independence India also. Most of the political parties held that fighting was their primary duty. Therefore it was not difficult for historians to take note that a tradition was built to see it as a menace which obstructed all advancement. One of them recently describes: 'Moderate Congress reform of specific British policies and economic development on capitalistic lines; the Gandhian dream of wiping the tears from the eyes of every Indian through village-based Ram Rajya; Nehruvian and Left perspectives of egalitarian change, planning and some kind of socialism; Ambedkarite prioritization of high-caste oppression—what all these had in common, across all differences, was a recognition of mass poverty and the need for one or other type of social justice.' The truths given out by Swamiji are now going into the hearts of all political thinkers, cutting across their diverse ideologies. He was completely democratic in action, socialistic in thought and spiritual in character, which made him almost infallible in all his endeavours, however challenging. Human rights and freedom are the very essence of his message. Manabendra Nath Roy, a socialist think-tank, did an interesting assessment of Swamiji, seeing his feeling as 'the rebellious spirit affecting the lower middle class intellectuals'. He said:

He was moved by the sufferings of the common people. De-classed socially, possessing a keen intellect, he made a spectacular plunge into the philosophical depths of Hindu scripture and discovered in his cult of Vedantism (religious Monism of the Hindus) a sort of socialistic, humanitarian religion. He decried scathingly orthodoxy in religion as well as in social customs. He was the picturesque, and tremendously vigorous embodiment of the old trying to readjust itself to the new.

The task of teaching the ancient wisdom of India to the West that Swamiji had laid upon himself was too difficult to accomplish. It demanded exceptional courage and preparation. To make one acceptable to the occident by one's intellectual, moral and spiritual attainments, being an unknown representative of a subject nation, was unimaginable. Bal Gangadhar Tilak appreciates Swamiji for his tremendous success in the face of an insurmountable impediment:

There has been extraordinary advancement of material science in the nineteenth century. Under the circumstances, to present the spiritual science prevailing in India for thousands of years by wonderful exposition and then to kindle admiration and respect among the western scholars, and , at the same time, to create a sympathetic attitude for India, the mother of spiritual science, can only be an achievement of superhuman power. With English education, the flood of material science spread so fast that it required extraordinary courage and extraordinary genius to stand against that phenomenon and change its direction.

Tilak's statement squarely manifests the type of impact Swamiji made at home.

Likewise, the outstanding impression that he was able to create abroad is discernible from the spontaneous comment '. . .the Swami is an honour to humanity' given by William James who attended

many of his lectures. According to Professor John Henry Wright of Harvard University, he ‘swept Professor James off his feet.’ Swamiji received letter from James addressing him ‘Master’. He ‘proved himself a brilliant match’ for ‘the Harvard professors’. But an amusing experience Bepin Chandra Pal had during his visit to England tells ‘how deep and extensive his work has been in this country’. One evening Pal was going to visit a friend in London. He lost his way. A lady accompanied by a boy came to him and showed him his way saying, ‘From certain papers I learned that you are coming to London. At the very first sight of you I was telling my son, ‘Look there is “Swami Vivekananda”’ He was ‘really surprised to see that the lady possessed such great veneration for Vivekananda even before she knew him personally.’ This, no doubt, speaks of Swamiji’s popularity among ordinary citizens there.

Swami Vivekananda’s victorious return from the overseas was a watershed in the modern history of India. His was a crusading drive to restore her lost glory. But his love for the country was not from any parochial consideration—geographical, demographical, ethnic, communal or otherwise. To him it was urgent that India lived with the nuggets of wisdom in her bosom. If she dies, he says, then ‘from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as male and female deities, with money as its priest; fraud, force and competition its ceremonies; and the human soul its sacrifice.’

Swamiji was a true sannyasi with unassailable integrity and commitments to truth, renunciation and service. So, nothing could change him though he brought about so much change in the world and was virtually swamped by praises. Every moment of his life was spent for the good of others. A couple of months before his passing he said: ‘If in this hell of a world if one can bring a little joy and peace even for a day into the heart of a single person, that much alone is true; this I have learnt after suffering all my life; all else is mere moonshine.’ His idea of starting a ‘machine for elevating the Indian masses’ took roots even in his lifetime. He was glad to see his ‘boys’ were ‘working in the midst of famine and disease and misery—nursing by the mat-bed of the cholera-stricken Pariah and feeding the starving Chandala’. Personalities like him are rarely born. When they take birth they leave indelible marks on earth which prevail notwithstanding relentless transformation of human civilization. As A. L. Basham finds ‘that in centuries to come he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world’.

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