

## Have We Accepted Vivekananda?

SWAMI PRABHANANDA

Street corners and parks are adorned with Swami Vivekananda's statue, city roads and public places proudly bear his name, and many boys and even girls are christened Vivekananda. Excerpts from Swami Vivekananda's speeches and writings are read out, his sayings are frequently quoted and not infrequently misquoted by all kinds of people for various purposes. His messages, quoted in hoardings, newspapers or magazines, leap out and grab out attention, as it were. There is some magic power in his words; the ideas these words carry and the noble sentiments they are loaded with are striking, exciting and motivating.

In the meeting of the national committee set up for celebrating the centenary of Swami Vivekananda's historic appearance at the Parliament of Religions I was amazed to find intellectuals of various hues vying with each other in expressing their adoration for the great son of India.

Quite reasonably one feels tempted to conclude that Swami Vivekananda has gone deep into the nation's psyche; that he is alive in our words and deeds; that we are doing what he wanted us to do. But this would certainly be a wrong deduction. The apparent is far off from the real. In fact, we have moved away from Swami Vivekananda. We have distanced ourselves more from him than our countrymen did a few decades back.

### **Skin-deep adoration**

A little probing reveals that our admiration of Swamiji's great call to the nation, our

appreciation of Swamiji's large contribution, our approbation of his vision of future India are all superficial; our regard, respect and love for him is skin-deep only. Our adulations and even our worship of Swami Vivekananda smack of artificiality. These are not statements posed by the congenital doubting Thomas. To understand how true these observations are, let us judge our writings and speeches on Swami Vivekananda and our ritualistic worship and birthday celebrations of Swami Vivekananda against the criterion given by Swamiji's Master, Sri Ramakrishna. He said, 'Meditate on an ideal and you will acquire its nature'. In the same strain he also said, 'One acquires nature of the object meditated upon'. Had we truly accepted Vivekananda we should have had some spark of fire that was burning in him. Had we adored him sincerely, instead of simply adorning his picture with flowers and garlands, we would have had a sprinkle of the sterling qualities of his character.

It is on historical record that hundreds of youths, responding to Swamiji's call—'My India, arise! come forward'—sacrificed their lives on the gallows of the tyrant British Government. And Rabindranath Tagore observed about such ventures: 'There at the source of the adventurous activities of today's youth of Bengal is the message of Vivekananda—which calls the soul of man, not his fingers.' This led to the country's independence. The momentum gathered helped us to consolidate ourselves as a nation—considered a rare achievement

given India's diversities and also to run the world's largest democracy. Not only these youths, all worthwhile personalities of pre-independence period came under the benign influence of Vivekananda. About this, the French savant Romain Rolland's remark that '...the present leaders of India: the king of thinkers, the king of poets, and the Mahatma—Aurobindo Ghosh, Tagore, and Gandhi—have grown, flowered, and borne fruit under the double constellation of the Swan [Ramakrishna] and the Eagle [Vivekananda]' deserves our attention. They, however, accepted Vivekananda as much as their understanding of him and attitude towards him permitted.

Nevertheless, in post-independence period, India has been swept off her feet by the cross-current of Western ideologies which dazzled the sight of our national leaders. On various pleas they gradually shunned Vivekananda who resuscitated the great Indian heritage and saved it from drowning into oblivion. Some of them branded him as a man of religion, and, India being a secular state, some political groups tried to belittle Vivekananda and got his writings and lectures erased from the textbooks of schools and colleges. Funnily enough, political and social compulsions of recent time has brought Vivekananda back. The government declared him a national hero whose life and achievements should be emulated by the youth of the country.

#### **Distorting the glorious image**

Unfortunately the last few decades saw vested interests exploiting Vivekananda for their ends and distorting his glorious image. We have to guard ourselves against such misdoings. We must have Vivekananda in his true colours. We want the 'beloved Narendra' of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. We want Narendra 'the instrument in the

Master's hand'. We need Vivekananda 'the man without fetters', the harmonizer of all diverse forces, the meeting point of the East and the West, the equalizer of privileges and, above all, the awakener of the soul.

Since independence we have made progress on several fronts. We have become self-sufficient in food production, our life-span has increased, our achievement in industrialization is commendable, our scientists and technologists have left their mark on the international scenario, etc. But during the same period divisive forces based on region, religion, ethnicity and language have raised their ugly heads. Moreover, these as well as widespread illiteracy, abject malnutrition, socio-economic inequalities, gender oppression, etc. have soured our achievements in different spheres. Worse still is the fact that India has been listed as one of the most corrupt countries, that terrorists seem to have found a safe haven in several pockets here, that work culture seems to have taken flight from here, and that population is growing fast and natural resources are being degraded rapidly. At the same time, the gap between our achievement and explosion of expectation has very much increased. Consequently, the profoundest crisis the country faces is the *character crisis*. These along with threats from neighbouring countries, political pressure from some developed countries, demands of the vagaries of the market, etc. are threatening the stability of Indian civilization. The situation seems to point finger at historian Percival Spear's glorious conclusion, 'Ripples on the surface leave India's depths unmoved'. Vivekananda too had singled out this essential feature of our civilization—its ability to absorb, assimilate and adapt—which explains the stability and continuity of our civilization in the midst of near-cathartic turbulence over the past 5000 years. This

remarkable ability to internalize all attempts to destroy its cohesion, seems to be under great strain today.

**Fundamental ideas of Vivekananda**

This century has been a century of great change, specially for India. But many changes have come about ignoring some of the fundamental ideas of Vivekananda who has been hailed by Romain Rolland as ‘the pilot and guide of the needs of the present age’. As for example, Vivekananda said, ‘. . .religion and religion alone is the life of India, and when that goes India will die, in spite of politics, in spite of social reforms, in spite of Kubera’s wealth poured upon the head of every one of her children. . .’<sup>1</sup> Vivekananda warned us saying, ‘If you do not raise the women, who are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother, don’t think that you have any other way to rise.’<sup>2</sup> Since working class is the backbone of the nation, Swamiji demanded that they must be conscientized. He said, ‘If the poor cannot come to education, education must reach them at the plough, in the factory, everywhere.’<sup>3</sup> Instead of multiplying such clear directives of Swamiji to the nation, let us admit the unpleasant reality that we have so far, particularly in post-independence era, paid lip services to Swamiji. Also instead of pointing an accusing finger at Vivekananda, or dismissing his message on the count that he has failed us or that he could bring about cosmetic changes only, let us confess that we have not taken to practising the precepts of Vivekananda sincerely, arduously and perseveringly. Therefore our tall claims that ‘we love Vivekananda’, ‘we follow Vivekananda’ or ‘we believe in Vivekananda’s words’ make a mockery of truth.

Our hypocrisy, insincerity and self-deception become transparent if we

remember the great Swami’s words. He said, ‘. . .reverence is a growth out of love; we can none of us revere him whom we do not love’.<sup>4</sup> The issue really boils down to this question: ‘Do we love Vivekananda, who wanted to project himself as a voice without form? Have we grasped his message? Have we done what he wanted us to do?’

In this connection it is worthwhile to recall the experiences of Swami Vivekananda’s compatriots. One of them was Swami Saradananda, who dedicated his life to implementing some grand ideas of Swamiji. Once he felt the need of exposing the fragility of the half-hearted devotion of the pseudo-followers of Swamiji. He had come to Belur Math to attend the birthday of Swamiji in 1912. He told a group, ‘Some people in the course of their conversation claim that they revere Swamiji. I often fail to understand its significance. If it means that they worship Swamiji in picture or image—well, this, too, is a kind of honouring him, no doubt. But the best way of paying respect to him is to live the ideal Swamiji has propagated and to steadfastly abide by his teachings.’<sup>5</sup>

**Points to remember**

Swami Saradananda practically echoed the precept and practice of Swamiji himself. To Swamiji, one ounce of practice was worth a thousand pounds of theory. Here are several aspects of the issue which demand our attention:

a) Swamiji wanted us to incorporate into our life as much as possible of what he wanted us to be. Therefore, it is not by proclaiming that we are loyal followers of Vivekananda but by being and becoming what he wanted of us we shall show our genuine respect to him. This reminds us of one statement of Jesus. He said, ‘Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord Lord, shall

enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven'.<sup>6</sup>

(b) Remembering Swamiji's dictum 'Practice makes us what we shall be', we should repeatedly do those things Swamiji wanted us to do. They would become habit with us and it is by the force of that habit we shall move towards the goal easily.

(c) Committed as he was in fulfilling the mission of his Master, Swamiji in turn demanded of his followers and admirers utmost dedication to the cause. He wrote to his brother monks rather bluntly, 'I shall be obliged to them who work out my ideas. Those who do not do that I am not interested in them, nor should they expect anything from me.'<sup>7</sup> Here, his guidance is quite clear. It needs no elaboration.

Aware that India treasures wonderful ideas but she is unable to reap their benefit, Swamiji laid great emphasis on translating those wonderful ideas into action. He made this point clear to the Editor of *The Light of the East* when he wrote, 'There must be freshness and vigour of thought behind to make a race virile. More than enough to strengthen the whole world exist in the Upanishads. The Advaita is the eternal mine of strength. But it requires to be applied. It must first be cleared of the incrustation of scholasticism, and then in all its simplicity, beauty and sublimity to be taught over the

length and breadth of the land as applied even to the minutest detail of daily life. This is a very large order, but we must work towards it nevertheless as if it could be accomplished tomorrow.' And to achieve this Swamiji gave the clarion call, 'My hope of the future lies in the youths of character—intelligent, renouncing all for the service of others, and obedient—who can sacrifice their lives in working out my ideas and thereby do good to themselves and the country at large.'<sup>8</sup> It is only those who can honestly respond to this call deserve to have the claim that they love Swamiji, that they have accepted Swamiji truly.

In conclusion, we have to critically study Vivekananda and his message in today's context. We must rid ourselves of the cobweb of confusion, vagueness and conjectures pervading the scenario. We have to streamline and strengthen our ideas. We have to be imbued with the spirit that was Vivekananda. We have to learn and appreciate Vivekananda's vision of man and his future, his understanding of the problems of India and ways and means for her regeneration and also his grand idea of India's unique role for the welfare of entire humanity. With such clear understanding and firm conviction only, if we can become effective instruments dedicated entirely to the cause, then only we may claim to have accepted Vivekananda and not before that. ■

#### REFERENCES

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|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda</i> , Vol. III, p. 146. | 5 <i>Udbodhan</i> (Bengali), Vol. 68, No. 12, p. 703. |
| 2 <i>The Complete Works</i> , Vol. VII, p. 214.                      | 6 Matthew 7.21                                        |
| 3 <i>The Complete Works</i> , Vol. VIII, p. 308.                     | 7 <i>Patrabali</i> (Bengali), p. 342.                 |
| 4 <i>The Complete Works</i> , Vol. III, p. 79.                       | 8 <i>The Complete Works</i> , Vol. VII, p. 230.       |

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