Swami Vivekananda and Youth Leadership: A Global Perspective

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There is a story that Swami Vivekananda used to tell which he heard from Sri Ramakrishna:

Once a starving and pregnant lioness attacked a flock of sheep, but as she pounced on one sheep, she lost her strength and died. At the same time, she gave birth to a cub. Now, the sheep were very soft-hearted, and perhaps a bit low on intelligence. They did not know where the cub came from, but they took it in and raised it as one of their own.

So the baby lion grew up in the company of the sheep, thinking all along that he too was a sheep. The sheep ate grass, and so did the lion cub. They bleated, and the cub learned to bleat also. Gradually he grew to be a big lion. But the dim-witted sheep still thought he was one of them, and so too did the lion. The flock of sheep was his whole world. This was all he knew.

One day another lion came to attack the same flock, and he was amazed to see the grass-eating lion there. Running after it, the wild lion at last seized it. But the grass-eating lion began to tremble and bleat out of fear. Then the wild lion scolded him, saying: ‘What is this! You—a lion—eating grass and bleating like a sheep! Shame on you!’ But the grass-eating lion just bleated and in a pathetic voice cried: ‘I’m not a lion. I’m a sheep.’

‘Nonsense,’ roared the wild lion. Then, dragging the grass-eating lion to a pond, he said: ‘Look at your face in the water. It’s just like mine. You’re not a sheep. You’re a lion.’ Then he thrust some meat into the mouth of the grass-eating lion. At first the grass-eating lion would not swallow it, but as he bleated he soon got the taste of the meat. Suddenly something awoke within him, and he let out a roar—a roar of a lion.

Again and again Swami Vivekananda urged us to realize that we are ‘lions’ and not sheep—that we have all power within us. As he said:

Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.

There is a belief that a sheep will follow the whim of any other sheep in front of it. It will even jump to its death over a cliff if others do so. It cannot lead. It cannot think. It can only follow—sometimes to its own destruction. And so it is with human beings. This world continually tells us we are mere sheep, that we must simply follow the herd—not thinking, just existing, living a meaningless life. We have all seen this again and again.

There are enough people in this world who love being sheep. They are asleep and don’t want to wake up. They don’t want to think. They don’t want to hear the call of the lion within. But most young people today are not satisfied with this. They don’t want to be sheep. They don’t want to just follow the herd. They want to become lions, to become leaders—to be unique, as Dr Abdul Kalam describes it.
But how do we become lions? Swami Vivekananda’s idea is that, if you firmly believe you are great, you will become great. He once told his disciple Sharat Chandra Chakravarty:

If you think that infinite power, infinite knowledge and indomitable energy lie within you, and if you can bring out that power, you also can become like me. . . . Go and preach to all, ‘Arise, awake, sleep no more; within each of you there is the power to remove all wants and all miseries. Believe this, and that power will be manifested.’

But there is another step to this manifestation that Swamiji gives. He also says: ‘Of one thing I am sure—that whoever wants to help his fellow beings through genuine love and unselfishness will work wonders.’ So with the sincere desire to work for the benefit of others, that power and strength of a lion will automatically come.

The king of animals

We do not know if there are any remote forests still left in this world. But it is said that in the recent past—that is, before the war in Vietnam—there were some there. And in the forests of Vietnam, it was the lion who was the protector of all the other animals there. He was the king of the forest because he was the protector of the forest. He was the one who was always alert. From his cave overlooking the forest he was constantly vigilant, looking out for any hunters who might enter there. As soon as he detected the sound of hunters, he would roar, sounding an alarm to warn the other animals. And this is why he was the king of the forest. The other animals looked up to him for protection.

So also, those who would be leaders must realize that along with the privileges of leadership comes great responsibility and self-sacrifice. Leaders must be ever alert that their actions benefit others. And the greater the leadership—that is, the greater the responsibility—the greater are the consequences of one’s actions. Leadership on a global scale implies that the consequences of one’s actions are of global proportions. That’s a heavy responsibility.

Due to the drastic changes that have taken place in the world in the last fifty years, young people today understand—more than any previous generation—what a global society is. Nowadays it is not uncommon that one’s own neighbourhood is made up of people of various races, nationalities, and religions.

Again, in one’s job a person might be sent to various countries around the world for business purposes. Or a school teacher might have in one classroom students who were born in five different countries. One’s own parents might be of different races, countries, or religions. Or some other member of one’s family might marry someone of a different race, country, or religion, or he or she might live in a different country. These things were almost unheard of fifty years ago.

All these changes have required major adjustments in people’s attitudes and ways of thinking, and for older people this has not come easily. Many problems have come about all over the world simply due to people’s lack of understanding of cultures different from their own. It is the young people, therefore, who have to show the way.

For this reason young people today are beginning to feel how urgent Swamiji’s call is. In fact, many of them are already starting to feel the burden that society is placing on their shoulders, and they understand that this world needs lions to lead it—not sheep. Today’s problems are not just local or national. In a global society, like ours today, all problems—including serious political problems—reverberate around the world, so young people must be ready to serve a global society.
Character: the lasting basis of leadership

Yet taking up the challenges of any type of leadership—with all the sacrifices it requires—is Swamiji’s idea of real character. This is his ideal of a true man or woman. As he said: ‘The true man [or woman] is he who is strong as strength itself and yet possesses a woman’s heart. You must feel for the millions of beings around you, and yet you must be strong and inflexible....’ By ‘inflexible’, Swamiji means that in spite of all temptations you must remain firm in moral principles; for the greater the power and responsibility that one acquires, the greater are the temptations that will arise. Therefore, tremendous mental and moral strength is required to resist those temptations.

Regarding feeling for others, Swamiji’s own life is a wonderful illustration of this. The following is just one example:

Late one night at Belur Math, one of Swamiji’s brother disciples, Swami Vijnanananda, came out of his room and found Swami Vivekananda pacing back and forth on the verandah. Swami Vijnanananda was concerned and asked him why he was not sleeping. Swami Vivekananda replied: ‘I cannot sleep. I am feeling very restless and deeply disturbed. I feel that there has been a terrible calamity somewhere, and that many people are suffering.’ Swami Vijnanananda was confused, as he could not understand what Swamiji was talking about. The next day it was learned from the newspapers that there had been a great disaster on an island in the Pacific, and that many thousands of people had died. Swamiji had become one with those people thousands of miles away, and had felt their suffering.

Love for others, by its very nature, will attract love from others. As Swami Ranganathananda, the 13th President of the Ramakrishna Order, once wrote: ‘Learn to attract, by conduct and behaviour, people’s love and respect. Attracting respect alone is not enough, for it contains an element of fear.’ Like the lion in the forest, there is great power, but the power is to be used out of love.

Now, some young people may be thinking, ‘Do I really want to be a leader?’ Perhaps they have gotten a bad impression of local leaders and politicians. But there is another way of looking at this: Whether one becomes a teacher, shopkeeper, engineer, IT specialist, or a political or business leader, or a President or Prime Minister of a country—whatever one becomes—one should live one’s life in such a way that one’s actions inspire others. One should live for others. And whether one’s actions affect just a few people, or they affect one’s whole country or the whole world, one should be an inspiration for others. That is the real leader—the real lion.

But from what we generally observe about the young people with idealism and energy, we should say, ‘It is you whom we want to be the future leaders.’ In fact, young people cannot sit satisfied being mere sheep. All of them at some point of time or other feel something of the power of the lion within.

And for those who feel the strength of the lion within, leadership comes automatically. You won’t have to seek it. It will seek you. It will seek you, that is, as long as one follows Swamiji’s advice:

Even the least work done for others awakens the power within; even thinking the least good of others gradually instils into the heart the strength of a lion.

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