

Swami Vivekananda- An Apostle of Philosophical Insight in the West

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Abstract

Great men are of no particular race or class. They are the flagbearers of knowledge, wisdom and intellect for the entire human race. Few people have influenced the psyche and psychological aptitude of generations as Swami Vivekananda has. When we make a list of the most virtuous, most dedicated persons who tried to bring about an evident change in the outlook of the people around them, three or four names come to our mind- Aristotle, Socrates, Leo Tolstoy and that young ascetic from India- Narendra Nath or the more popular name- Swami Vivekananda. Their literature, their teachings and the core of their intellect were not the sole property of the countries they belonged to but were the storehouse of wisdom for the generations to follow all across the globe. They never minced words to call a spade a spade. The authority of the conservative state could not suppress the voice of these iconic men who were simplistic, clear sighted, concerned about the society around them. They made it a point to be the spokespersons for the uncountable human beings who needed a torchbearer to guide them on the path of righteousness, steadfastness and truth; the things curbed and trampled underfoot by the governments of their times. The present paper is an elaborate effort to compile the philosophical outlook of Swami Vivekananda as was witnessed by his disciples and the society during his stay in the West.

Keywords: naïve, cosmopolitan, conscientiousness, satvika, fecundity, sectarianism, blackguardism. Great men are not born great, they grow great. Mario Puzo

Narendra Nath was one of the major influences over the people of his nation as well as of the U S A. Few people would deny the fact that the people who came across his theory of the Vedanta were not influenced by the naïve, frank and straight forward approach of this sanyasi from the East. It is a noteworthy fact here that the great souls of this world have lived for a very short period on this planet and left for their heavenly abode at a young age. Jesus Christ, Alexander the Great, Swami Vivekananda- all belonged to this select list of people of uncommon merit who came to this world with a mission, fulfilled it to a large extent and left the world with their indelible impress upon it. Swami Vivekananda went to the U S A to attend the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in Sept. 1893, introduced the Indian philosophy of the vedas and the upnishads and opened up the vista of an all inclusive cosmopolitan and worldwide universal toleration to the world. He began giving classes to the Americans, interested in Vedanta. He never for once wanted the limelight of public attention but wanted to sound reality to the Americans who had got only a glimpse of the Indian philosophy during his speech at Chicago. Truth and God were his guiding forces and they gave him the strength that he required for the purpose.

The young ascetic from India had become a name in philosophical discourse in the city of New York. His impetus was on teaching his students how to quiet the mind and while teaching them, he

went into meditation sometimes so deep that he was hard to be brought to normalcy. These moments were testing for him because he wanted to be a teacher first and a yogi much later. Peace, benediction and a halo of the virtue marked his presence in the meditation classes to the amazement of his students. Firmness and conscientiousness are fully developed. Benevolence is quite conspicuous.....Summing up the organization, it will be seen that kindness, sympathy and philosophical intelligence, with ambition to achieve success in the direction of higher educational work are his predominant characteristics.¹

Swami Vivekananda taught his students Raja-yoga and Jnana-yoga. Students learnt practical spirituality by means of Raja-yoga. By virtue of gaining control of senses and impulses, students learnt to spiritualize their overall personality. As a perfect teacher to teach meditation, Swamiji was an epitome of meditative spirituality. Students thus learnt that practice and realization are the means to religion. Through Raja-yoga, Swamiji taught his students to lead an austere life and have as their meals only simple food called Satvika in India. Psychic powers were shunned by Swamiji as they according to him impeded the spiritual progress. To him, a human effort to be divine was fruitful if the person should-“Seek only after one thing, and that, God.” During his teaching of both the yogas, Swamiji was a preacher and a mystic combined in one. With a scientific bent of mind, he upheld the psychological and rational value of yoga. He advised his pupils to apply a rational approach towards everything in life.

During his stay in the United States of America, Swamiji was slowly gaining name as a prominent philosophical leader from India. From Hartford, he got an invitation from Metaphysical Society to lecture. He gladly accepted the invitation as he had come with a view to illuminate the world about the mysteries hence unresolved. He elaborated the topic of ‘Soul and God’. His discourse on this topic was taken well by the intellectual audience present at the event. The daily paper of Hartford had the following words of praise for the calibre and acumen of the ascetic from India- His lectures are more in consonance with those of Christ than those of many so- called Christians. His broad charity takes in all religions and all nations. The simplicity of his talk last night was charming.²

To his audience, whether rich or poor, high or low, the academically brilliant or the curious illiterate, swamiji was a source they resorted to for clearing their spiritual doubts and the fog of ignorance and doubt was dispelled when the spiritual leader stood as the undisputed omniscient person who knew all about the self. Swamiji held sway over the prominent personalities of the times. One of them was the celebrated author and poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, More than a decade after she happened to attend a lecture of Swamiji did she refer to it with profound fecundity in the New York American of May 26, 1907: ...we felt ourselves lifted up into an atmosphere so rarefied, so vital, so wonderful, that we sat spellbound and almost breathless, to the end of the lecture.³

Swamiji was primarily concerned with the spiritual aspect of his work. He was always focussed on providing spiritual training to those dedicated souls who could provide an impetus to his noble and exalted work. This was a crucial period of activity in the life of swamiji as he went all out to ensure that his disciples gained his vision and liberate themselves. This young swami from India was, always from the very outset, against religious sectarianism and superstitions. He wanted people to secure freedom on the spiritual front through the truths of Advaita- Vedanta, to be self dependent, heedless of the path fate takes them to. His expectation was that all people should secure the mingling of the self with the divine. He was a towering personality and his ideals and spirituality were highly rich and he never fought shy of sharing his abundant storehouse of knowledge with the

people around him.

In order to actualize his thoughts, swamiji founded a centre in New York named Vedanta Society in 1894. However, he was not benefitted by this society in any way because the small group of people who had the zeal to help him in whatever way they could, proved trouble to him as they started dictating him in various ways unknowingly complicating the flow of his spiritual thoughts for the sake of humanity. No doubt he was willing to work for the upliftment of mankind but he did not want someone to control or guide his journey along this path. Perturbed at the interference of his closed circle in his noble task he wrote in a letter to Mary Hale on Feb 01, 1895- "I hate this world, this dream, this horrible nightmare with its churches and chicaneries, its books and blackguardism, its fair and false hearts, its howling righteousness on the surface and utter hollowness beneath, and above all, its sanctified shopkeeping."⁴

Swamiji was heedless of whether people loved or hated him. To him, help, rejection, starvation and misery were of equal status as he had become a sanyasi with whole hearted fervour. It was a substantial time before his disciples came to understand what was in his mind. His mode of teaching clarified to them that he wanted from them a spiritual organization of the self rather than an external organization. But it was not an easy transition. Swamiji had to, during his stay in the U.S.A. face weighty opposition because the Americans were totally ignorant about the Indian philosophy. But swamiji did not fight shy of putting up a brave front and showed his mettle. In a letter from Swami Kripananda to the Brahmapadin on Jan 12, 1896, the following words bear a testimony to the above mentioned fact: It is true that, on the occasion of the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, many Indians succeeded in calling the attention of the world to the light from the East, and caused a wave to pass over our country; but this wave would have died away as quickly as it had come, without leaving any lasting effect, had it not been for the efforts of this one man who unremittingly persisted in grafting the Hindu religious ideas on Western materialism and never rested until his work was crowned with success.⁵

Swami was a curious blend of an overflowing, impersonal love for all humanity with a deep personal tenderness and a sense of affection for his friends, not to overlook the monastic vision and renunciation of the world. At times, he was at an exalted level but he never relinquished the human touch in himself. He took keen interest in things and events taking place around him. He was a tireless ascetic devoted to the propagation of Indian philosophy and religion. Swamiji delivered lectures on this vast Hindu philosophy and his lecture on Advaita Vedanta during his American Odyssey was of the highest order as it spoke about the highest stage of realization. Having a comprehensive command over the Advaita, Swami was never rigid to keep his teachings limited to Advaita approach. He knew very well that on foreign shores, he was catering to the people of diverse mindsets and inclinations. Such people were in need of varying paths to tread in their spiritual journey. The Advaita Vedanta considers the non dual nature of the Real and Permanent in a universe that is in the process of constant transformation.

The quality of a spiritual leader should be not so rapidly moving in the direction of his philosophy and leaving his pupils in dismay and feeling distraught. The swami was an efficient teacher in this regard. He had in his mind the spiritual health of his pupils. The Eastern thought was so brought to light by this learned teacher from the East that the conscientious and hard working translators had their doubts and illusions cleared by him in a deft manner. They felt that this great master had opened for them-

‘Magic casements opening on the foam’.⁶

They were introduced by the swami, to a great treasure of Universal Thought and Wisdom. They may be regarded as India's greatest heritage for ages and for years together have sustained humanity and nurtured the spiritual hunger of millions across the country. Swami through his lectures produced no ill feeling and his work could be considered to that of a missionary who spread the message of universal brotherhood, humanity and benevolence. The missionary zeal of his effort was having an inner strength as the main driving force. He could not be termed a sectarian as he promoted not one religion but the Universal religion of love, peace and humanity.

In Europe after the U.S.A., the swami had an immense appeal to the numberless masses who had been disillusioned with the blind materialism of the times. The people wanted a sustained religion to fill their vacuum of spirituality. They always expected that spirituality would sustain them and in this flow of thought, swami came to their aid. Like a learned master, he gave an explanation of the Vedanta philosophy to his followers in the Europe and they found an entirely new view of life till then hidden behind the veil of a false sense of superiority and the mad race of materialism. While in London, Swamiji was immensely believing in the capacity of the English to assimilate elevated ideas and although they assimilate the idea slowly, they do it in a sure and abiding manner. Swamiji was sanguine of a future when the religious leaders of Europe would, under the impact of the Vedanta, form a liberal community in Church and support the universality of religion. Thus swamiji was satisfied with his work in England and in his famous “Reply to the Address of Welcome in Calcutta” on February 28, 1897, he said- The bold, brave and steady Englishmen, ... if he has once an idea put into his brain, it never comes out,... There is less of imagination, but more of work and who knows the well-spring, the mainspring of the English heart?... there is a deep spring of feeling in the English heart. ..if you have personal contact and mix with them, , he will open his heart, he is your friend forever, he is your servant. Therefore in my opinion, my work in England has been satisfactory than anywhere else..”⁷

Of Swami Vivekananda's influence on the psyche of the British, Mr Bepin Chandra Pal while in London shared with Indian Mirror of Feb 15, 1899- “But on coming here, I see that he has exerted a marked influence everywhere....Owing to his teachings, most people here now believe firmly that wonderful spiritual truths lie hidden in the ancient Hindu scriptures. Not only has he brought about this feeling , but he has succeeded in establishing a golden relation between England and India.”⁸ Swami was an apostle of philosophy and he was hailed as the Prophet of re-interpreted and re-invigorated Hinduism. He spent three years in foreign lands and presented and at the same time interpreted, Hinduism to the Western nations. Swami's lectures opened the vision of the educated Indians and they saw with renewed zeal and craving to the treasures of their religion that were acknowledged by the world. To them, the Vedanta could be the universal religion. With a patriotic fervour, Swamiji had a deep study of the problems that plagued the nation.

While travelling back to his motherland, swamiji was all the time meditating on the history of nations and even while in the West, he was pondering over India's relation to the world and vice-versa. With time, a national consciousness had taken the better of him. He passed on this consciousness to his brothers back in India. Even while returning to his native town, during his halts at various spots in the country, swamiji urged the people to practically implement the teachings of the Vedas. Even in the region where Buddhism had a stronghold, swamiji urged that the God worshipped as Shiva, as Vishnu, as Buddha is one. There is the ultimate need of tolerance and

sympathy among followers relating to different creeds. Swamiji touched Indian shores on January 26, 1897. It was a satisfying journey and swamiji was ever hopeful that this visit would be helpful in creating a bond of oneness among the nations of the world.

Swamiji touched Indian shores at Pamban and he paid a visit to Rameshwaram, the following day, to the great Shiva temple located there. On that moment, on that sacred ground, swamiji spoke about the importance of the place of pilgrimage. He shared his opinion about the nature of worship. He enthused his followers to worship Lord Shiva not only in images but should see God among the poor, the weak and those afflicted with disease. The Raja of Ramnad gave him a stately welcome and in recognition of his efforts to promote the Hindutva philosophy and marking his arrival to Rameshwaram erected a tomb. The inscription on the tomb was as follows-

Satyameva Jayate

The monument erected by Bhaskar Sethupathi, The Raja of Ramnad, marks the sacred spot, where His Holiness Swami Vivekananda's blessed feet first trod on Indian soil, together with the Swami's English disciples, on His Holiness's return from the Western Hemisphere, where glorious and unprecedented success attended His Holiness's philanthropic labours to spread the religion of the Vedanta.

January 27, 1897

Swami Vivekananda's visit to the U.S.A. and England was indeed a pathbreaking event in the history of humanity. His magnetic presence in the general life of both these countries made a lasting impact on the mindset and spiritual aspect of the society of those times. He asserted that for a universal harmony, each nation has to play its role. He addressed the nation stating that India's special strength is spirituality. He was also quite optimistic that the future of India is bright because it has its history and tradition teemed in spirituality. The Vedanta philosophy shared by him in the West was an altogether different and a novel philosophy of religion introduced by him. His views on the life and religion of the Westerners were accepted by them as their true image. Swamiji was admired for his clear cut concepts and his sound knowledge of the Vedantas. His identity on the world stage of his times was not only because of his masterpiece speech at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago or his naïve and gentle way of addressing the residents of those nations but by virtue of his being the true representative of a nation with a rich heritage and philosophy that showed path to millions of souls across the nation. His energetic and oratorical quality was held in high esteem by his Western disciples. His greatness is unparalleled in the history of humanity as a supreme leader of spirituality and a propagator of the rich Hindu philosophy in the Western world. A great soul indeed, he was a beacon of light for the propagation of Hindu scriptures in the West.

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