

CELEBRATING SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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Great men are seldom born. It is sheer good fortune of ours that in one decade of the 19th century, three great men were born in India: Swami Vivekananda on January 12, 1863, Rabindranath Tagore on May 4, 1861 and Mahatma Gandhi on October 2, 1869. Each one of them became a formidable figure in his sphere of work: Swami Vivekananda in religion and spirituality, Gurudev Tagore in literature, and Mahatma Gandhi in the freedom movement and public life. Swami Vivekananda was the first leader among these three outstanding persons to make a major impact on the Indian consciousness both in his time and thereafter.

Narendranath Dutt (Swami Vivekananda) was born into a Hindu family on January 12, 1863 in Kolkata. During his short life-span of thirtynine years he gave new meaning to the Hindu philosophy of

tolerance. It was he who built the Ramakrishna Order to propagate the values of the Vedanta philosophy and to work for the spread of quality education and health care throughout the length and breadth of India.

The contribution of Swami Vivekananda needs to be viewed in three inter-related perspectives. First, he brought religion to the centre-stage and gave a new meaning to it. Second, he stressed the need for harmony among faiths. Third, his teachings continue to be of relevance.

II

A contemporary of Swami Vivekananda, the famous German thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), made an outstanding statement declaring the 'death of God'. Subsequent scholars and writers went on to highlight the fact that people were no longer as interested in God as they were earlier. It was felt that science and rationality were guiding human affairs more decisively than religions. This was not acceptable to Swami Vivekananda and he went on to give a new meaning to religion.

Swami Vivekananda maintained that service to God should mean service to the poor. Discarding monks and pandits, temples and mosques, churches and satras, which were traditionally the centres for religious dialogues that enjoined on the participants the need to pursue higher values of renunciation and moksha, Swamiji emphasised something new, and that was to help the poor man. He coined a new word Daridra-Narayana—‘God in the poor and the lowly’—as a religious axiom. Daridra-Narayana brought in an element of the sense of duty which was enjoined on men and women to serve the poor if they wanted to serve God.

Like Buddha, Swami Vivekananda highlighted the role of rationality in human conduct. He believed that whatever we do must be justified and supported by reason. Man must learn to live with a religion which commends itself to intellectual conscience and the spirit of rationality.

Religion should also be the sustaining faith that insists on the intellectual and spiritual development of every human being irrespective

of his caste, creed, community, or race. Any religion that divides man from man, or supports privileges, exploitation, and wars, cannot commend itself.

Swami Vivekananda more than others emphasised that every religion must serve the poor and should aim at the removal of poverty, ignorance and disease among the downtrodden people of the society. He further emphasised that in this task there could be no discrimination between man and woman, between one sect and another, between one profession and another. He, in fact, raised service of the poor to the level of worship, and at that level, harmony among different faiths automatically became a pre-condition. Such an environment demands reconciliation among human beings. In order to overcome enemies and animosity we need to renounce hatred and cultivate love and compassion for all.

Swamiji's earnest prayer was: "May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship my God, the miserable, my God, the poor of all races, of all species."

III

TODAY it is no longer possible to live an isolated life. People of different faiths live side by side. It is, therefore, necessary to understand each other: their needs and aspirations, faiths and belief practices.

A close examination of Swamiji's teachings and practices reveals that he thought ahead of his time. His ideas emphasising dialogue among faiths and justification for plurality of faiths and belief patterns are of great relevance to today's strife-torn world.

Swami Vivekananda explained that the Vedanta philosophy was not Brahmanic or Buddhist, Christian or Muslim, but the sum total of all these. In his historic address to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on September 11, 1893, Swami Vivekananda clarified:

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, or a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the othes and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

Swamiji also saw this relevant in the Indian context. The Indian idea was to make man find the best that he could in his environment, and live up to it in all sincerity. The Hindu conception has been what was described by Paramahansa Ramakrishna in the form of an aphorism: *Jato mat, tato path*, that is, ‘As many opinions, so many ways’. Swamiji greatly valued plurality of approach in human affairs and spoke against uniformity.

Swamiji was in favour of harmony among religious beliefs and against one religion for all. As Swami Vivekananda records:

The greatest misfortune to befall the world would be if all mankind were to recognise and accept but one religion, one universal form of worship, one standard of morality. This would be the death-blow to all religious and spiritual progress.

IV

THERE are two aspects of Swamiji’s teachings and practice which are of particular relevance to India and the world today.

Swami Vivekananda was one of the great founders of the national freedom movement of India. A large number of people in his time and later who took an active part in the freedom struggle drew inspiration from him. Persons like Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda provided a way of life to the people not only in regard to their spiritual upliftment but also in their approach towards society at large. The stress on rendering service to the poor is not only a social obligation to be discharged but a path of salvation as well.

Indian democracy is facing serious challenge in view of our inability to keep public servants away from temptations. The Ramakrishna Order, set up by Swamiji since its inception, has taken care of their members in a manner that they continue to be symbols of integrity and devotion to duty. How has this been accomplished? The Order takes care of every member's food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare needs. There is considerable equality in treatment in respect of food, clothing and healthcare provisions. It motivates its personnel through training and idealism. On the other hand, political parties do not

have any system to support or sustain their active members. Time has come for political parties to draw appropriate lessons from the Ramakrishna Order.

We are living in a world which is marked by hatred and violence, terrorism and suicide squads. The terrorists are using religious slogans to justify their evil deeds. There are many people who believe in the dictum: “my god is superior to yours”.

How could a man of religion be a terrorist? How could a religious person join a suicide squad if he believes in service of the poor? Swamiji had answers for all these questions as well as justification for plurality of faiths and harmony among religions.

Swami Vivekananda had rightly declared in the Parliament of Religions that “if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will

soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not Fight’, ‘Assimilation and not Destruction’, ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension’.

V

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA was handsome in looks, handsome in thoughts, and handsome in deeds. Such a combination of beauty is rarely seen in an individual. His short span of life and monumental deeds constitute a rare example of an individual’s earnestness and endeavour in human history.

As India celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, let us focus on and work for making India a strong nation and an equitable society and the world a better place to live in.

The author, currently the Governor of Sikkim, is a distinguished scholar, thinker and public servant. His latest book is *Bahudhā and the Post-9/11 World* (OUP:2010).