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REVIEW ARTICLE

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AS 'THE PRINCE OF ORATORY' AND 'THE PREACHER OF SPIRITUAL IDEALISM': AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper projects Swami Vivekananda as a preacher of spiritual idealism laying focus on Indian spirituality and his stature as a key person and tallest figure in bringing out social and religious reformation by adding preaching and practice as twins for spiritual idealism which is part and parcel of ancient Indian thought, philosophy and culture. It also analyses how he brings home an important point that spirituality is an essential part of life to lead a peaceful and happy life. No doubt Swamiji stands out as a unique figure in his conception of the importance of physical nature of man which is due to the presence of spirituality innate in man. As a spiritual leader he longed to see a dynamic religion which is beautifully picturised in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Mother India has produced many great orators in the sand of time and Swami Vivekananda holds his place rather respectively and proudly among that gentry. Unawares, Vivekananda very often said things that startled his audience, for he said them casually, carelessly without any thought about the impact that they might produce. What he said might be simple truths, but it is these simple truths, spoken with authority and coming spontaneously from a world teacher. As a great luminary, Swamiji was a physically well-built and spiritually well-developed man of multiple personality. The great personality of his getting rolled into a healthy combination of the health of Asoka, the heart of Buddha, the brain of Acharya Sankar, the love of Sri Chaitanya, the spiritual fire of Guru Nanak, the apostolic eloquence of St. Paul, the mildness of Lord Christ and the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and mother Kali – is said to have left remarkable footmarks on the sand of time. He is the one with a spiritual staff in hand, the laconic king among men in a mendicant's robe. His was a life dedicated to the realization of Truth. His was an aim to uplift all the human beings from the lower level and good them to experience the ultimate Bliss. His words possessed an inexplicable charm – a charm that captivated the hearts of millions of people all over the world. Swami Tejasananda holds:

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"The accumulated spiritual forces of three hundred and thirty millions of people compressed themselves as it were into the multicoloured life of the towering personality who set himself to the Herculean task of rebuilding the nation on the basis of a synthetic ideal bearing in it the best elements of the cultural contributions of the East and the West" (P1).

Swami Vivekananda is every inch a lover of his motherland, for he always thought about the degeneration and decay of India and how to make her future bright. Systematically and coherently moving from one point to another, he presents the future picture of India in a forceful and appealing language. His words come out naturally and his phrases and clauses of connection are stucked one after another sweetly and perfectly as if the threads of a musical instrument are touched one by one to create a new rhythm and sweet music. Emphasis is given on and about India and its glory. Now and then, he uses imperative sentences, e.g. 'look forward', 'march forward and make India brighter' etc. Talking about a healthy society for a great future of India, Swamiji stressed on the necessity of organization, accumulation of power, co-ordination of wills and one mind bringing them all as it were, into one focus. His contribution consists in his speeches, letters, poems etc. P.S. Sastri observes:

"Swami Vivekananda's lectures, letters and writings reveal not only the dry intellect of a thinker, but the outpourings of a heart, the spontaneous outburst of a heart deeply stirred" (294).

The very aim of his was to stir the human heart and awaken mankind from the deep slumber to spiritualism. He discerned that the cause of the maladies of the modern man lay in his having jettisoned the spiritual values for the temporary pleasures of day-to-day life. He realized that sincere and earnest efforts should be taken to enlighten the people on how spiritualism is an essential and integral part of life. He proclaims that "the present age requires new modes of thought and new life" (P 129). To introduce the life of Swami Vivekananda is to introduce the subject of spiritual life itself, for he practiced spiritual exercises and as a result experienced a kind of Bliss which he wanted everyone to experience. It should be added that Swami never propounded any new philosophy; nor did he try to impose his philosophy on others. "Swamiji revived that old spirit, recast and recommended it to make it more relevant to the modern world – full of complexities and contractions" (Dutta 265).

Swami Vivekananda was of the opinion that the world, as a whole, stands divided into two parts – the East and West. The East remained poor by resorting to spiritual experience and realization and the West, increased the materialistic pleasures by inventing more and more through science and technology. He realized that there should be harmony between materialism and spiritualism, lest there should be an incompleteness in human life, for human life resolves round two things – materialism and spiritualism and materialism should gradually but ultimately be subordinated to spiritualism – This way of living is something an ideal one for Swamiji – ideal in the sense the hopes, desires and aspirations of a human being could be achieved to some extent. Neither should the hopes, desires and aspirations be suppressed, nor should they be allowed to remain unfulfilled. He preached an easy way of canalising and sublimating them. By canalising and sublimating them, a human being could reach higher levels towards the realization of Truth, the goal of human life. When he realized that the god of human life was different from the one that was misunderstood and misconstrued, he, at once, made up his mind that India could help a great deal in this respect. "He wanted each individual to realize the one Reality, both within as the immensurable self and without as the divine oneness of all life." (The Life of Swami Vivekananda 15). Swami Vivekananda was born as child Narendranath or simply Naren – as he was called in his pre-monastic days, in the famous Dutta family of Simla in the northern part of Calcutta on Monday, 12th Jan 1863. Both of Naren's parents, Vishwanath Datta and Bhuvanewari Devi, were unusually gifted with the admirable qualities, such as exceptional intelligence and compassion for the unfortunate. His mother knew by memory long passages from Hindu Scriptures and it was from her that he first heard the great religious epics of India. "It was at her knee", wrote His Eastern and Western disciple, "that he first heard the tales of *the Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and it was no doubt that he thus caught some of the dramatic fire and force that he exhibited later." Naren's education began at the knee of his mother from whom he learnt the Bengali alphabets, the first English words, the romantic tales of *the Ramayana*.

Inspired by religious episodes, he once meditated in a room of his house with so much rapt attention that the door of the room had to be broken to awaken him. Thus, Yoga consciousness was evident in him from the very beginning and this proved the spiritual power of Swami Vivekananda. These extraordinary powers and the inborn religious instinct so

spontaneously manifested in a sparkling variety of forms even in childhood, gave faint but sure indications of what a great spiritual destiny was in store for him in future. Truly speaking, India from time immemorial, has been a source of great spiritual power giving birth to a long line of mystics and earnest seekers of Truth. It was natural for a person like Swami Vivekananda to experience certain Indian Spiritual ideals and try to make them comprehensible to the common man. He wished that what he wanted to speak should be in ordinary language shorn of conventional scholarly and mystifying phraseology of the philosophers. Language should not be a barrier but an easy conveyance of one's thoughts. Language is the vehicle through which the speaker or the writer reaches his audience. This vehicle in the hands of Swamiji becomes fast moving and looks appealing and impressionable. His choice of words is unique, with them he weaves a beautiful garland of his speech. They are sense moving – those who heard become charmed and wined, those who read find themselves bewildered and inspired and those who practice them feel gloried. His figures of speech show the capacity and command of a great speaker. They are natural. He is a master in employing similes and metaphors. He is an example of simile: "to pay as much attention to the means of work as to its end". Metaphorically, Swami Vivekananda reminds us that "we are traders" and "we are all beggars". Repetition of words and phrases is his well-known style." His words in English have since become a new gospel. Through English, he gave voice to his mission and expression to that which he himself was – the centre of a spiritual world impulse" (P 29).

While attending the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, his majestic appearance, expressive of a virile manhood, combined with his striking attractive apparel, symbolizing his marvelous personality in fused with spiritual power that he bore from his early hood, made him conspicuous among the oriental delegates. He opened his lips to accost, the audience endearingly as 'Sisters and Brothers of America' and deafening cheers from all corners of the Hall overwhelmed him. It was a glow of his spiritual and mental vigour with which he poured out his heart and the surging stream of spirituality, of endless love for God and deified humanity, of universal faith in all religions. It was here that by his magnificent oratory and spiritual power, Vivekananda acquainted the House with the lofty ideas and ideals connected with various aspects of Hinduism and also with his central theme of universality of religions based on the findings of the Vedic seers. Swamiji's visits to America and England had proved his spiritual and mental status on the International level. It should be made clear that his thoughts are nothing but his personal experiences. By constant and steadfast experience, he realised certain truths, which, he thought, could help human beings in keeping their lives happy and peaceful at all levels. The speeches of his were found to be extempore and it must be said that he had a divine grace which inspired his speeches keeping the audience spell-bound. Whenever he spoke, his voice electrified the audience. In the words of G.M.Jagtiani, "He had a dynamic dominating and magnetic personality. The charm and power of his eloquence captivated all" (P5).

Never did he suffer from paucity of words or ideas. Ideas and words were so harmoniously blended that there had always been an incessant flow of speech. He proved that he could convey to the audience and abstract idea in a lucid and simple way. His speeches were punctuated with simple anecdotes which a common man could easily understand. He tried to

convey in an easy way what he realised after hard experience by driving home the point that hard experiences were not mysterious but simple personal ones. Having had a personal and direct contact with Swami Ramakrishna, Swamiji knew fully well as to how to make the listener understand him. "He who has realised the Atman becomes a store house of great power. From him as the centre, a spiritual force emanates, working within certain radius; people who come within this circle become inspired with his ideas and are overwhelmed by them" (Muttucumaru 138). A cursory glance at his speeches will, no doubt, enable one to understand that Swamiji always spoke about spiritual values. He himself said:

"I don't believe in any politics. God and Truth are the only politics in the world; every else is trash" (P43)

To Vivekananda, spiritualism is all-pervasive, it includes everything and excludes nothing. Spiritualism is not a new thing to India particularly to the Hindus. The ancient seers experienced the bliss of spiritualism and they even made it a way of life. According to Vedic seers, a life without spiritual values is more animal-like. The goal of life is to become one with the Absolute – God. Being endowed with reason, they proclaimed that every human being should strive hard to achieve this goal. Secondly, they even made it clear that spiritual values could not be explained through words; it was something achieved through personal experience. To them, spiritual values are not to be experimented but to be experienced. By living a simple life, these Vedic seers have shown that once a human being experiences spiritualism, he will seek after higher and higher values and a stage comes where it becomes a total experience. The Vedas and Upanishads show this way. There was a time in India when people realised that spiritualism was part of human life. Unfortunately, there began a slow degradation and degeneration for people in the middle ages started inclining towards materialism, which, they thought, would beget them everything in life for they suffered from illiteracy and poverty. During the period when the humanity was at crossroads, Swami Vivekananda emerged and dedicated his life for the spiritual upliftment of human beings. Swami Vivekananda was first pained by the indifference of modern Indians to spiritualism. Then he looked at the world and found that the orientals were trying to copy the modern civilization blindly. Humanity at large, in the modern world, needs a guide and that guide could only be an Indian. The crippled humanity was confronted with an all pervasive, all-powerful, all captivating personality – Swami Vivekananda. As S.R. Talghatti says, "His was a rich personality in which the physical, mental, intellectual and moral qualities fructified into a fine example of a spiritual being" (P 167).

The life of Swami Vivekananda shows what a spell he could exercise on the suffering humanity with his powerful speeches on spiritualism. Whatever he learnt and understood from his Guru Sri Ramakrishna and whatever he earned through his physical and spiritual potentialities, Vivekananda acquainted the world with the faith of the Hindus rooted in the oldest of scriptures, the Vedas; he told about the impersonal character of its teachings, its universal message of unbound Catholicism, its presentation of various readings of divinity, monistic, qualified monistic and dualistic and also about various kinds of religious practices grouped under four fundamental types, namely Jnana Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bharati Yoga and Karma Yoga, covering the entire range of human tastes, temperaments

and capacities. He experienced the doctrine of karma and rebirth and enlightened on the Hindu idea of salvation through the realization of one's identity with the Absolute. Praising Vivekananda's vigour of spirituality and personality, Arun Bhattacharjee states:

"His greatness lies in the fact that in the nineteenth century when India was considered a backward country which had everything to learn from Europe, he proved the word that India had a great religion and culture which Europe should learn" (P 13). Swami Vivekananda considered religion as the manifestation of the divinity that is already in man. According to him, religion is a growth from within till one reaches the last stage of human evolution, when the individual realizes within his own self all his dreams of perfection and absolute freedom and discovers the kingdom of heaven that has been lying all the time within the heart. When man conquers his inner nature, he becomes perfect and finds God, the ever-free master of nature, the living ideal of perfection and absolute freedom, as the essence of his own being. When one attains such a state, he is said to be religious. Hence Swamiji said:

"Religion does not consist in erecting temples or building churches or attending public worship. It is not to be found in books or in words or in lectures or in organizations. Religion consists in realization" (P 13). This manifestation of Swami Vivekananda was inspired by his own realization and his theory of practical Vedanta. Swamiji is looked upon as a great religious teacher and one whose spiritual and physical powers shown in his deeds and action and indeed he made a definite contribution to the study of both Hindu religion and philosophy. His great works on aspects of Vedanta in theory and practice still inspire hundreds and thousands of enquiries all over the world. But it has also been proved that he was more a philanthropist, one who dedicated himself to the service of man as a form of serving God. From the point of view of all practical religion, God and man are the obverse and reverse of the same medal. He exhorted:

"God has become man,
man will become God again"

Quite honestly speaking, Swami Vivekananda never wanted that all men should take to Sanyasa or monkhood. His contention was that spiritualism was a dynamically active spirit of life that gods and guides the human life. According to him, to live a meaningful and contented life, spirituality is as important as anything else. Almost all speeches of Swamiji made it clear that "Life's purpose is to wake up; to realize the Blessed Divine Reality" (P 66). What he experienced he wanted everyone to experience. Swami Vivekananda's glory lies in the fact that he made people think. He only explained what lay buried in the Indian ancient scriptures. But his explanation was not theoretical; it was based on personal experience. His lucid explanation of practical spiritual life showed a new way of life. His appeal was universal and his concern was the upliftment of the entire humanity. The influence of his lectures on spirituality was so great that everybody understood that "Swamiji's religion was man-making. His education was man-making. And the life he lived was man-making" (Jagtiani 45). His life's ambition was to see everyone a 'complete individual' free from the fetters of nation, religion, creed and caste. He was concerned with the 'soul' of every individual as he very often emphasized that each individual carried divinity in him. He believed that by

personal experience, each individual would not only transform himself but would also contribute a little towards the transformation of the world. This transformation, he wished, should make life purposeful. He unfolded the mysteries of human life by adding dynamism to spiritual life. He stressed only on the virtues of life so that the whole universe could become a heaven on earth. He says;

“I am the teacher of virtue, not of sin.
I glory in being the preacher of light
and not of darkness” (228)

Swami Vivekananda is said to have rendered valuable services to all those who are concerned about the spiritual and social development of humanity by applying himself zealously and with so much talent to the task of making the governing values of high Indian tradition better known to his country and to the outside world. It was this divine light which inspired the conscience to think over the sufferings of humanity and particularly those of the Indians. He was particularly concerned about the low level of living of Indians, ill-health, diseases, malnutrition, illiteracy, factionism, casteism, poverty etc. He very much realized the economic and social difficulties of the poor classes in India. He aimed at removing poverty, for he thought that no spiritual uplift is possible without first solving the problem of poverty. He pointed out:

“Empty stomach and religion go ill together.
It was mockery to offer religion to a starving man”(16)

He can be ranked among the sublime and thought – provoking rhetors of the world. His style has certain elements of abstruseness, but at the same time, it has, in a considerable degree, many elements of simplicity, specified in a manual of discourse. His magnetic assertion, balanced use of abstract terms and forms of expression, simple structure often extended with connectors, clauses and phrases of connection, repetition with force and lucidity – all these combined show his mastery over language. His speciality lies in his peculiar flights of sublimity in his speeches because they are experimental and path-setter.

As far as the kinds of his discourses are concerned, they are of mixed types: exposition; argumentative, descriptive and narrative – all find their place as the situation demanded. Swami Vivekananda as an orator deserves praise and respect from all corners of the world. His language is forceful, charming and thought provoking. To conclude, it may be said that by living an exemplary life. Swami Vivekananda has shown that bookish dormant spiritualism could be made dynamically active so that the world, society could be repaired to provide a 'world order' of society. “What he himself wanted was to see the strength of that old India finding new application and undreamt of expression, in the new age. He longed to see a dynamic religion” (Nivedita 241). One of the powerful spiritualists India has ever given to the world, Swamiji longed to build the human beings of all nations with spirituality. He was not an Indian but a universal prophet and he dreamed of a universal religion holding together all the truths of all religions. He is and will be remembered as a dynamic spiritualist who served God by serving others.

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