

Vivekananda—The Revolutionary Swami

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Vivekananda was one of the most amazing personalities of modern India. Perhaps India has never witnessed a religious figure of the kind Vivekananda was. Far from renouncing the world, he was deeply involved with it. He completely redefined and revolutionised the concept of the Mahatma. The traditional Mahatma was supremely indifferent to his surroundings and the suffering of the people around him and sought his spiritual salvation alone practicing *laissez faire* of the spirit. Vivekananda completely rejects that ideal. Therein lies his greatness; it required extraordinary empathy and tremendous daring as he rejected the personal salvation line in the teeth of resistance and ridicule of his own colleagues of the Ramakrishna Mission who accused him of being Westernised. In his characteristic forthright manner he declared:

Him I call a mahatman (great soul) whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a duratman (wicked soul)... So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them. I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all their money by grinding the poor wretches so long as they do not do anything for the two hundred millions who are now no better than hungry savages!

Also, Vivekananda's attack on the self-centred middle class sounds very contemporary. For there is no dearth of duratmans in the post-1990 India who strut about in their finery and are completely untouched by the miserable plight of their not-so-fortunate countrymen.

It is extremely important to visualise the historical context of Vivekananda's life and work. Otherwise one is likely to miss its full significance. More than a century of British rule with its vicious suggestions of racial superiority had generated a strong feeling of inferiority among most Indians. This was compounded by the residual medieval ethos of fatalism (leaving things to a non-human agency) and asceticism with its devaluation of earthy life.

Vivekananda's emphasis on physical strength [his celebrated and apparently shocking observation, "Better to play football than read the Gita"], his contempt for the chattering classes who just talk and do nothing else, and above all his extolling the message of Vedanta regarding the divinity of man, "Tat Tawan Asi" (Thou art that) must be seen in that context. Time and again he returns to the message of Vedanta and never fails to exhort his countryman to shake off their sense of inadequacy and have faith in themselves as they carry a divine spark in them. The pragmatic intent is all too clear in this observation:

We have lost faith in ourselves. Therefore to preach the Advaita aspect of the Vedanta is necessary to rouse up the hearts of men (emphasis added), to show them the glory of their souls. It is therefore that I preach the Advaita.

It is indeed remarkable that he uses the Vedanta for secular, this-worldly ends. (Could there be a cue here for the social activist?) This must indeed have been chicken soup for the souls frightfully low on self-esteem.

AND what can be a better moral basis for a socialist society than the belief that there is a divine spark in every human being? It is true that Vivekananda didn't believe in class war, but if empathy for the underdog is a distinguishing characteristic of a socialist, he was a better socialist than most present-day socialists—of all hues red, pink and the rest. (V.K.R.V. Rao, the eminent economist and a great admirer of Vivekananda, described him as a Vedantic socialist.) Even in the hour of his triumph at Chicago, he agonised over the miserable condition of his countrymen. He denounced caste as “the negation of Vedanta” and passionately advocated a better deal for the Dalits. He himself lived with a family of sweepers during his travels through Central India. He was proud of his spiritual heritage, but it never came in the way of calling a spade a spade. He denounced the deformities and perversions in Hinduism in no uncertain terms:

No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism. The lord has shown me that religion is not at fault, but it is the Pharisses and the Sadduces in Hinduism, hypocrites who invent all sorts of engines of tyranny.”

Also, he was deeply distressed by the condition of Indian women who were condemned to a life of ignorance and backwardness. He believed there was nothing in Hindu tradition to justify their marginalisation and cited the glorious examples of Gargi and Maitreyi, and motivated Margaret Noble—better known as Sister Nivedita—to start a school for the education of girls in Kolkata.

In recent times the Sangh Parivar has tried to appropriate Vivekananda as a kindred spirit, a proto-saffronist of sorts. The truth is: there is nothing in common between the two. It is true that Vivekananda laid a lot of emphasis on physical strength but it was never glorified for its own sake, and was not divorced from intelligence and empathy. Also, the man who declared “all religions are sacred to me” and who had the highest regard for Islam for its love of equality, would make a very odd member of the Parivar. Vivekananda was no cultural chauvinist. Far from it. In fact, his denunciation of the prevailing rituals and ceremonies of Hinduism as “religion of the cooking pot” reminds one of Kabir. In the light of all this, would it be fair to describe him as a revivalist and bracket him with Bankim Chandra and Dayanand Saraswati as historians generally do?

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