

## REFUTING GANDHI'S VIEWS

**N**ow a new chapter in Swami Ashokananda's life began that would create a furor and reveal his mettle. In October of 1925, assigned to Mayavati, he went alone by train to the ashrama in the Himalayan foothills. Swami Vivekananda's English disciples James and Charlotte Sevier had founded the ashrama at his request, and from there one of the Order's English-language magazines, *Prabuddha Bharata*, was edited and published. Swami Vivekananda himself had only twenty-five years earlier visited the ashrama and had dedicated it once and for all to the study and practice of Advaita Vedanta. Nestled in the Kumayun Hills, at over six thousand feet of altitude, it was one of the most coveted posts of the Order—for those monks, at least, who liked solitude and contemplation.

Usually swamis coming from the plains walked from the railway station at Tanakpur to Mayavati, a long trek through deep forests and up and down steep mountains along winding paths. Since Yogesh Maharaj was not in good health, a servant with a pony was sent for him; even then the trek took two days and a night. At the ashrama, Swami Ashokananda found Swami Pavitrananda and Swami Vividishananda, who was then the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. These two swamis, it turned out, were both admirers of Mahatma Gandhi's views and policies, whereas Swami Ashokananda was not.



Swami Ashokananda as a young monk at Mayavati (prior to 1930)

Before long, this difference of opinion led to ringing arguments in Bengali. In Madras, Swami Ashokananda had noticed that in every February issue, *Prabuddha Bharata* commented on the annual meeting of the National Congress that had been held the previous December. It had seemed to him that these February

editorials were simply echoes of Gandhi and lacked the grandeur of Swami Vivekananda's thought. He had said to himself, "We have much more to say to people than this! Our thought should be of a much higher order!" He now said this aloud and tried to point out the impracticality of Gandhi's economic policy. That was the tenor of his side of the discussions with the two swamis at Mayavati, discussions that were never conclusive. The swamis, shocked at Yogesh Maharaj's views of Gandhi, would go off, he said, on a tangent; he was never able to complete his argument, nor would they listen.

One day in January 1926, the newspapers in which the meeting of the December National Congress was discussed reached Mayavati. To Swami Ashokananda's thorough disgust, Swami Pavitrananda and Swami Vividishananda were all praise for the stand Mahatma Gandhi had taken. "I gave the two swamis a blast," he said. Whereupon Swami Vividishananda mildly asked, "Why don't you write it down?"

"All right!" Swami Ashokananda replied. And then and there he went to his room and steadily wrote the burden of his ideas, giving all the reasons behind them and for once finishing his argument. His paper amounted to a refutation of Gandhi's views as presented at the National Congress of December 1925. Swami Pavitrananda and Swami Vividishananda read it and were silent.

Then, after a time, Swami Vividishananda asked, "Can we have it for the February [1926] editorial?"

Swami Ashokananda said, "Certainly."

It was a courageous move on Swami Vividishananda's part. While Swami Ashokananda only once mentioned Mahatma Gandhi specifically, there could be no question of whose policy the article was criticizing. The nation's hero was being taken to task. The editorial was entitled "Religion in Indian Politics" and read in part,

There is a subtle law which operates in all planes of life. Stated in general terms, it comes to this: Lower interests fulfil themselves by serving the higher ones; the latter in their turn attain fruition by declining to be exploited for lower profits; always the small for the great, never the great for the small.

This is true equally of individuals and nations. No nation can with impunity exploit its higher powers for lesser gains. To do so is to commit a Himalayan blunder, and though it may at first yield success, the end is always disastrous.

We are afraid the Indian National Congress has been guilty of the identical error in its policy and activities during the past few years. It has sought to exploit religion for political ends. And not a little of the

consequent failure and confusion is due to this unnatural and reverse policy. Up till 1919 . . . the Congress had been a purely political organization. The special Calcutta session inaugurated the policy of non-violent non-cooperation. This gave the Congress, in effect and practice, a religious colouring. It assumed a philosophical tone and preached a certain gospel of life. . . . Altogether the movement looked more religious than political. Thus was religion made a hand-maiden of politics.

The editorial went on to enumerate and describe the undesirable consequences, one of which was bitter communal struggles and internecine quarrels. It then continued,

The fact is, we are not yet in a position to spiritualise politics. Spiritualisation presupposes that every individual should become conscious of his spiritual nature and make it active in every detail of his life. Only when such individuals engage in politics, does politics become spiritualised. Spiritualisation of politics therefore requires a spiritual reform of stupendous magnitude as a preliminary condition. . . . We are aware that there are some who can, by virtue of their spiritual eminence, even now take a spiritual view of politics. They are Karma Yogins, they have spiritualised their whole life. . . . The whole nation or the majority at least must become such Karma Yogins before Gandhi's spiritual politics can be actualised and made a mass movement. We cannot manufacture Karma Yogins by the simple passing of a resolution!

We invite the nation to divert its attention from mere political agitations to silent and steady works of national reconstruction. Let each devote his whole soul to constructive work, not forgetting his spiritual ideal. . . . There are things which the nation has cherished with greater love and care than political freedom. To their augmentation let our best energies be devoted. In spite of our cult of non-violence and soul-force, we are yet far from regaining the true spiritual outlook. Let us strive hard to attain the true vision, and if we are sincere, the truth shall reveal itself.

The editorial, short though it was, created an uproar. It was highly praised or irately criticized in intellectual and political circles. The *Modern Review*, a prestigious magazine in Calcutta, quoted extensively from it and gave it much praise. At Belur Math, many swamis, among them Swami Gnaneshwarananda and Swami Vishwananda, objected to the temerity of criticizing Mahatma Gandhi. While Gandhi was not yet looked upon as Bapu, the father of his country, he



was already highly revered and his ideas were in some quarters considered to be gospel. It was almost a sacrilege to refute him, an outrage for a young unknown swami to openly oppose his views. But for the first time *Prabuddha Bharata* was a voice to be reckoned with. Thenceforth, both Swami Pavitrananda and Swami Vividishananda began to listen to Swami Ashokananda's ideas without brushing them aside. He was more often than not able at least to complete his arguments. More important, his own self-confidence, which had taken such a tumble in Madras, began to come back—now with his prolonged and exacting reflections behind it.

Meanwhile, in the winter of 1925–26, the swamis had decided to have a sort of Sunday meeting. The original purpose was to give Swami Vividishananda practice in lecturing, for in those days he was a painfully slow “public” speaker. At first only four swamis participated: Swami Ashokananda, Swami Vividishananda, Swami Pavitrananda, and one other. They started having impromptu talks, and this developed into Sunday afternoon assemblies, held on the long veranda of the bungalow where the Seviars had lived, down the hill from the main Math building. In the spring of 1926, Swami Pavitrananda returned to Calcutta, where he was manager of the Advaita Ashrama branch. (He would not return to Mayavati until 1930.) But in that same spring, other swamis came up to Mayavati, and most of them attended the meetings, which by then had taken on a well-structured form. On alternate Sundays there would be extemporaneous lectures. One unsuspecting swami would be called upon to speak then and there on a subject secretly chosen for him. He had five minutes to gather his thoughts. Then he had to lecture on the subject from the highest standpoint and to the best of his ability. When he was finished, the others would bombard him with criticism, and he would have to stand his ground. On the other Sundays, the ordeal was not quite as horrendous: one of the swamis would give a prepared talk on a subject chosen six weeks in advance. The others would also have boned up on the same subject and were prepared to question him.

Among the swamis who came to Mayavati in the spring of 1926 were Swami Shuddhananda, a great scholar and assistant secretary of the Order; Swami Madhavananda, then president of Advaita Ashrama and also a great scholar; Swami Nikhilananda, who had just distinguished himself by his good work at the first convention of the Order; Swami Vijayananda; and several others. One Sunday, it was Swami Ashokananda's turn to give the prepared talk. The Swami's subject was cosmology in the Vedanta and Sankhya philosophies. “I described each system,” Swami Ashokananda told us, “and raised the question whether or not these were based on direct experience, and if so, why they differed. I pointed out that Swamiji had described the steps of creation, or evolution and dissolution,

from direct experience in his poems." At the end, when Swami Shuddhananda, who was presiding, gave his closing talk, he said very gravely, "Today I have learned many new things." Swami Ashokananda's self-confidence went up another notch.

WHILE SWAMI MADHAVANANDA WAS at Mayavati, Swami Vividishananda, whose term as editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* was up and who from the start had a fondness for Yogesh Maharaj, suggested that he become the next editor. He had, after all, proved his ability with his "Religion in Indian Politics." Swami Madhavananda agreed. And thus Swami Ashokananda took over the editorship of the magazine in June of 1926.

He found it to be a monumental task. The editor was responsible for writing almost one-third of each issue and for editing and often rewriting the contributed articles. He of course wrote the editorials; also, he translated from Bengali and Sanskrit and wrote book reviews, the section entitled "Notes and Comments," and other articles as well. The first issue under his editorship came out in August of 1926. It surprised almost everyone.

While in Madras Swami Ashokananda's brother monks had come to know him, at Belur Math and Mayavati, except for a few, they knew him not at all. He seemed witty, friendly, but a maverick in his thinking and outspoken about it. Beyond that, nothing was known. He seemed to have no spirituality, no practicality, nothing but intellect, which some found too sharp for comfort. But lo! here was a deeply thoughtful, spiritually oriented, yet down-to-earth editor!

Shortly after the August 1926 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* appeared, Swami Ashokananda's work with Romain Rolland began—a tremendous task on top of his editorial duties. As is well known, Romain Rolland had become acquainted with Sri Ramakrishna through Dhan Gopal Mukherjee and with Swami Vivekananda through Josephine MacLeod. The vivid accounts of these extraordinary souls by these two enthusiasts had fired Rolland to write their biographies. He wrote to Swami Shivananda for information, and Swami Shivananda, in turn, directed him to Swami Ashokananda. Thus a prolonged correspondence began, in which Romain Rolland would ask questions and Swami Ashokananda would reply in detailed letters, which sometimes ran to forty or fifty typing-paper-size pages (in India such pages are almost legal size in length). He wrote in longhand and made longhand copies of every letter.<sup>[31]</sup>

A few comments regarding this correspondence can be found in Rolland's published journal for 1915–43, entitled *Inde*. Two excerpts, as translated from the French by Maryse Bader, read,



October 1927.—A very lengthy and interesting letter from Swami Ashokananda (11 September) on the current development of the Ramakrishna Mission, and on the position taken by the Order in view of the current social problems of the present time. A whole chapter, precise and documented, most intelligent, which I will use in the conclusion of my future work. I answer the Swami, October 4th. On one point, question his thought. He believes that the link which reveals itself between the Vedantic ideas and certain ideas or tendencies in the Occident, comes totally from the modern-time spreading of Vedantic thoughts. In truth, I told him, "This thought, this link rests on the identical foundation of human nature, and especially of the vast Indo-European family." I recall Pascal's words: "You would not be looking for me, had you not already found me."

December 1927.—Continuing correspondence with the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Ashokananda is a man of admirable activity, with a precision which is not Oriental. Not only does he give answers to all my questions, with thorough articles full of documentation, but he also puts me in contact with other remarkable personalities of the Order. It is thus that I receive letters from Sister Christine and from the sage Boshi Sen, who has taken the trouble to gather for me all the parts of Vivekananda's writings, defining his attitude with regard to science.[\[32\]](#)

The correspondence continued until Rolland's book (*Prophets of the New India*) was finished in 1930 and published by Advaita Ashrama, turning out to be a landmark in Indian bookmaking.[\[33\]](#)

When he became editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* Swami Ashokananda wanted to enlarge the format of the magazine so it could accommodate more material—two-thirds more. At first this idea was opposed by the president of Advaita Ashrama, who was then Swami Vireswarananda, but the trustees of the Order approved of it, and in January 1929 the new format with larger pages and two columns to a page appeared. Its frontispiece was a facsimile of Swami Shivananda's benediction in his own hand: "My blessings on the Prabuddha Bharata in its new form. May Swamiji's message reach through it a wider public." Until the present day, *Prabuddha Bharata* has retained this more generous format.

In his editorial in the February 1929 issue, Swami Ashokananda took up the urgent and huge question of how India could enter the modern world and yet retain her spirituality. The editorial was entitled "Spiritualising Nationalism." It was, in a sense, a reply to Mahatma Gandhi's policy of home weaving and so on,

but it was also in itself a stirring, well-reasoned, well-written exposition of how India could wade in the materialism inevitably attendant upon industrialization and national prosperity without soiling her ideals; how she could, in short, grow in spirituality while growing in material strength and well-being. Let us quote a little. He asked,

Shall we sacrifice our national ideals for the sake of India's external prosperity? *No, that cannot be.* Are we then to spiritualise politics? How can that be accomplished? This, then, is the crucial question.

He looked at all angles of this question, explored how it had been answered in the past and elucidated how it must be answered in the present and future. He pointed out the inadequacy of Mahatma Gandhi's policy and, finally, he set forth and clarified at length Swami Vivekananda's solution to this complicated but deeply critical problem. In brief,

Swamiji believed that the industrialism of the West will have its full sway in India, however vicious it might be; and he believed that India would become a great industrial nation. . . . He felt all the iniquities of present-day industrialism, with its degradation of the mind and exploitation of the weak. But he also felt that, good or evil, India cannot escape it, and the best thing for her would be to face it and make the best of it. . . . Modern India thus finds a strong support in Swamiji in her bid for industrial greatness. . . .

Did he also want the political emancipation of his country? Certainly he did. His ideal of freedom was absolute, as he often declared: it must be the freedom of the spirit, of the mind and also of the body. All these he wanted for his country. He devoutly wished that India should be great materially, intellectually, politically, and above all spiritually. Surely Indian nationalism also seeks as much. . . .

His support of nationalism does not mean that he also advocated the means that are employed by our politicians in imitation of the West. The aspirations of modern India find place in Swamiji's vision, but their means do not. . . . He prescribed a new motive of service and struggle—the struggle for self-realisation. Every man and woman of India must be filled with a burning enthusiasm for spiritual self-realisation. And when they will, with such a motive, devote themselves to the service of India, they will not only achieve materially and intellectually, but also spiritually. . . .

Let self-realisation be the battle-cry of New India. The self is endowed



with infinite power, illumination and joy—let this be brought home to every man and woman, every boy and girl of India. Let them feel that life's only quest is this self-realisation and let everyone start from wherever one is at present, towards the goal. Let the consciousness of this inherent power and greatness spur everyone on his way.

Naturally this consciousness will not in all or even most cases, appear as a struggle for spiritual self-realisation. That will only be in cases of a minority, at least in the beginning. To most men, it will be a consciousness of the power of endurance, concrete material achievement and fearlessness. To many others it will be the incentive to high intellectual and cultural achievements. But if the consciousness of the real nature of the self be there—and we should never cease to proclaim it to all and keep it ever before the nation—this crude self-realisation will not be the last item of achievement; the original motive will by its very impetuosity impel and drive us on to higher and higher self-realisation, till we reach the very heart of the Eternal. *It all depends on the original impetus.* This alone will determine the direction of our progress and its destination. On this again depends how much we can be affected by the evils that infest the material aspects of nationalism. If the original impetus be not powerful enough to take us beyond the planes of politics or industrialism, there is every danger of our being stuck in the morass of moral complications which are so luridly evident in Western nationalism. So the proclaiming of the glory of the Atman is one of the ways of reconciling politics, etc., with the spiritual ideas of India.

Swami Ashokananda went on to speak of the need for the practice of *karma yoga*, of practical spirituality, of the service of man as the worship of God, and the necessity for men of spiritual realization to lead the country. "And thus," he concluded, "shall the nation advance, realising all the phases of the self, material, mental and spiritual, avoiding evils and consuming them where necessary, towards that Summit where the light of Heaven kisses the crown of India."

Under the editorship of Swami Ashokananda, *Prabuddha Bharata* became widely read and acclaimed. His editorials were directed toward India's highest spiritual ideals and at the same time were stirring calls to the country to awake and take her place in the stream of modernity and the congress of nations—to become active, strong, and progressive. In open opposition to the views of Mahatma Gandhi, the Swami believed firmly that both spirituality and industrialization were possible. With care and vigilance, they could go hand in hand to the glory of the nation. In this he followed Swami Vivekananda and urged

everyone to do the same. Like the first editorial that Swami Ashokananda wrote in 1926, the succeeding ones were highly praised and extensively quoted from by the *Modern Review*. They came as bombshells not only to the intellectuals of India but, as one young swami would later discover, to the village people as well. They were read assiduously, discussed, and even written about.

But while Swami Ashokananda's editorials were perhaps the most impressive contributions to *Prabuddha Bharata*, they were only a small part of each issue. The other material was of great interest and, perhaps thanks in some part to the editor, well written and always readable. This was of course in the days when everything about the Ramakrishna movement was new; there was an abundance of unpublished material of immense value. Each issue was a feast—and a well-balanced one. There were articles of historical, philosophical, and topical interest written by eminent scholars, both lay and monastic; there were monographs on a variety of subjects written by Swami Ashokananda himself, and book reviews, also written by the editor, in which he praised (sometimes highly) or demolished (sometimes scathingly) some current book. There were English translations of Sanskrit scriptures—notably, *Vedantasara* and *Ashtavakra Samhita*—and scholarly dissertations on Indian philosophy. There was something for everyone, and all of it was good reading and full of substance.

One book to receive the Swami's particular scorn was Katherine Mayo's infamous *Mother India*, which threw venom over the face of India with its many lurid and scurrilous falsehoods.<sup>[34]</sup> Not only did Swami Ashokananda hold it up to ridicule and the light of hard, indisputable facts, but so also did other writers. They had a field day with this book, until it lay in shreds. Another book went to the opposite extreme, glamorizing India and the life of Sri Ramakrishna beyond all reason. This was Dhan Gopal Mukherjee's *The Face of Silence*, which had served as one of Romain Rolland's inspirations.<sup>[35]</sup> In an article entitled "A Biographical Fiction?" Swami Ashokananda highly commended Mukherjee's plan of presentation and then went on to say in part, "Never have we been so sorely disappointed as in this book. It has been like looking on a fair face fraught with insanity. . . . The book is a strange medley of facts and unjustifiable fancies."

The Swami's own reading was, as always, extensive. At Mayavati he had access to many Western magazines, such as *Harper's Magazine*, the *Century*, *American Weekly*, the *Forum* of New York, and the *Realist* of London. Through such reading he had his finger on the pulse of world thought; it gave him an overall view of Western life and ideas as they were then. He plumbed the shallowness of the West's best thinkers, including Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw, and sensed the depths of the West's spiritual hunger.

In March 1929, there appeared in *Prabuddha Bharata* under the title "The



Thought of Mahatma Gandhi" a three-and-a-half-column review of a book written by an Englishman in praise of Gandhi's policy of home weaving. [36] Using this book as a springboard, the Swami discussed the impracticality, inappropriateness, and inadequacy of Gandhi's economic program.

Mahatma Gandhi's reply (urged by his Bombay followers) came out the following July in his paper *Young India*. "He should not have answered," Swami Ashokananda would later remark. "It was not a good reply." Among other less-than-strong points, Gandhi deplored as "sacrilege" Swami Ashokananda's quotations from Swami Vivekananda. In "Notes and Comments" of the September issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*, to the shock of some and the delight and serious reflection of others, Swami Ashokananda devastated Gandhi's article.

In the September issue of *Young India*, Mahatma Gandhi replied again in an article entitled "Reason v. Authority." Again, he did not address the main issue of the spinning wheel versus the industrialization of India. Rather, he devoted his reply to a continuation of his criticism of Swami Ashokananda's "inferential invocation of the authority of the illustrious dead in a reasoned discussion, [which] should be regarded as sacrilege," and went on to enlarge upon this thesis. In the November issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*, Swami Ashokananda made short work of Gandhi's reply. And in the November and December issues of the magazine there appeared a long two-part article by "A Seeker of Truth," entitled "Politico-Economic Reconstruction of India," in which the truth-seeker's ideas (suspiciously similar to the editor's) were clearly set forth. In the first three months of 1930 Swami Ashokananda produced collections of quotations from Swami Vivekananda's *Complete Works*, in which Swamiji had stated his belief that India should be industrialized.

In the April and May 1930 issues of the magazine there appeared two articles by a professor of economics, Shiv Chandra Datta, entitled "Gandhi and the Economic Problems of India." These articles, as the editor explained, minutely and completely set forth Mahatma Gandhi's economic policies without comment (and with a perfectly straight face). It was a "dispassionate account." "Our readers know," the editor wrote, "that *Prabuddha Bharata* has not found it possible to support the economic policy of Mahatma Gandhi in toto. But it is due to that great soul that we give our readers an idea of what that economic policy is."

In the November issue of 1930, a balancing article, or editorial, appeared, entitled "The Economic Policies of Swami Vivekananda." And there the matter rested, both sides aired. Many years later, Sankari Prasad Basu wrote of this historic exchange in his book *Economic and Political Ideas: Vivekananda, Gandhi, Subhas Bose*: "Going through all the articles of Ashokananda and replies of Gandhiji, we [have] to admit that the latter's expositions were no match for



Ashokananda's sturdy and comprehensive intellect. Gandhiji simply reiterated his faith with great sincerity, and that is all. Ashokananda in his turn was also an idealist, a man of religion, but spirituality did not obstruct him to see and understand the material needs of the millions." [37]

Meanwhile, Volume 2 of Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* had come out in 1929 and was reviewed in the March 1930 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*. Swami Ashokananda had high praise for the book and great admiration for the man. "Many of the conclusions arrived at by Gandhiji through his experiments may not coincide with the experiments of others," he wrote; "but the rigidity with which he could stick to his purpose will be an object-lesson to all idealists, to all who want to live their lives to a purpose and not wallow in the mire of sense-enjoyment. . . . His autobiography . . . will be read with reverence as long as noble ideas do not fail to inspire human beings." Although Swami Ashokananda would always object to Gandhiji's policies, the sacrifice and dedication of the man touched him so deeply that years later, when Gandhiji was assassinated, for one week he could not restrain his tears from often welling up into his eyes and running down his cheeks.

Swami Ashokananda's method of writing editorials was almost never laborious. For four or five days before the actual writing, his mind would gravitate around a subject. In later years, for the benefit of his disciples who were trying to write, he explained his procedure: "I would let my mind gather around one subject, and I would dwell on it. Then I would think of an opening sentence. In the morning when I woke up I would go at once to my desk and start writing. I would write on and on until the editorial was finished. It would then be about twelve o'clock noon. I would have lunch with the other swamis, and in the afternoon I would read over what I had written. Only a word here and there would need changing. I would send the manuscript (of five or six thousand words) just as I had written it to Calcutta. The galley proofs were sent to Mayavati for correction. The page proofs were corrected in Calcutta; Swami Vijayananda [the swami who had taunted him at Belur Math] was the proofreader."

It was, though, not Swami Vijayananda but Swami Vishwananda (who earlier had come to Yogesh Maharaj's defense on another matter) who now objected strenuously to his criticism of Gandhi's policies. He was now head of the Bombay center and wrote directly to Swami Shuddhananda, then general secretary of the Order. He told him to instruct Swami Ashokananda to stop his outrageous criticism of Gandhi. Swami Vishwananda's letter referred specifically to the review of the book on home weaving, which had appeared in the March 1929 issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*.

In the autumn of 1929, when Swami Ashokananda came down from Mayavati

to Calcutta, Swami Shuddhananda showed him Swami Vishwananda's letter. They were standing on the veranda outside Swamiji's room at Belur Math. The letter was like a spark to an explosive. His eyes flashing and his stance regal (as they were when years later he related this incident), Swami Ashokananda said, "Swami Vishwananda has no right to interfere with what I do! I am not expressing my own personal opinion in *Prabuddha Bharata*, but writing for the Order, which is far greater than Gandhiji!"

Swami Shuddhananda said nothing. As for Swami Shivananda, although he regularly read *Prabuddha Bharata*, he made no comment about its criticism of Mahatma Gandhi's policies, thus tacitly giving his approval. And the young editor went on as before.