

Presidential remarks on

The relevance of Swami Vivekananda Today

Talk delivered by

Swami Shantatmanandaji of Rama Krishna Mission

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We are all beholden to Rev. Swami Shanthatmanandaji for a very scintillating and informative talk on ‘the relevance of Swami Vivekananda today’. I believe, and my impromptu expression of the view we have formed, is, that we do feel convinced of the relevance. I am thankful to SEARCH and especially Mr. Krishnamani and Ms. Ranjana Narayan, Advocates for giving me this opportunity of listening to Swamiji and the honour of presiding over this talk this evening.

I open posing a question to myself - how come, the SEARCH is searching for the relevance of Swami Vivekananda today? Something has happened that the topic – ‘the relevance of Swami Vivekananda today’ has become of relevance coinciding with the 150th birth day celebration of Swami Vivekananda.

Today’s world is torn by fundamentalism, aggression, commercial consumerism, cut -throat economic competition, loss of peace, loss of ethical values. Result ? Frustration. The common man feels lost. The humanity all over the world is searching for peace, co-existence, and sustainability. A sort of negativity has descended everywhere and the worst hit are the peace loving and right minded persons. India has an additional problem. We are the people residing in a country, but the sense of being citizens much less patriots of an independent nation, seems to be missing. Generally speaking the whole world, and India in particular, need leaders who have spirituality in thoughts and humanity in action. We need saviours in our leaders. We need creativity and positivity, with a determination not to compromise on ethics in values, and, welfare in society. An ideal leader is one *who knows the way, shows the way and goes the way*. The history records that there has been a leader, who was born in India and traversed the world with a mission. He *knew* the way; he has *shown* the way; he did *go* the way, but alas the time fell short. He could not finish his journey translating his thoughts into action and probably that is where he left the thread to be picked up by his fellow human beings of India, specially, the intellectuals – those who have been blessed with competence and capability needed in a leader!

Swami Vivekananda was born on 12th January 1863. His first lecture from a public platform was on September 11, 1893. On July 4, 1902 he passed away. In a letter written by him to Mary Hale on 2nd March 1898(four years before his death), he had said – *‘Death I have conquered long ago, when I gave up life’*¹

*[Hai husool-e-aarzoo ka raaz tark-e-aarzoo;
Jisne duniya chhod di mil gayee duniya use.]*

The secret is that one who renounces the world conquers the world.

Swami Vivekananda lived for just a little over 39 years, but he successfully accomplished the mission of his life, for which he had descended on the earth. His lectures and writings have been collected and published by Advaita Ashram of Calcutta, in eight volumes covering almost 4000 pages. About 10 years before, I had procured two sets of volumes for a meagre price of Rs. 220/- each, one set consisting of eight volumes in English and the other set of ten volumes in Hindi. The language is simple, easy to understand, but, catching and engrossing. To the extent I have been able to read the thoughts and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, I have found them to be full of creativity and positivity, providing solutions and resolutions to the problems and issues, and motivation and inspiration, to one and all, especially to the youth.

Speaking for myself I am yet to come across any other thinker and motivator radiating the qualities of self confidence, self respect and self help, so much as did Swami Vivekananda. These are the virtues most needed in the citizens of an independent nation such as India.

Today, the most misunderstood words are - Hinduism and Secularism. To illustrate the relevance of Swami Vivekananda today, I would like to share a few quotes from the philosophical thoughts of Swami Vivekananda.

Speaking of the spiritual superiority of India over the West, Swamiji said –

“The whole of the Western world is on a volcano which may burst [and] go to pieces tomorrow... Now is the time to work so that India’s spiritual ideas may penetrate deep in the West... The world wants it; without it the world will be destroyed... Here is the life-giving water with which must be quenched the burning fire of materialism which is burning the core of

¹ *The Life and Times of Swami Vivekananda*, Nandini Saraf, p.9

*the hearts of millions in other lands. Believe me, my friends, this is going to be*².

Why and how India? Look at the self confidence of Swamiji – *‘India will be raised, not with the power of the flesh, but with the power of the spirit; not with the flag of destruction, but with the flag of peace and love.*’³

Swamiji firmly believed that India is the only saviour of the world today. He said, if not India, *‘Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for the religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct; and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest; fraud, force and competition its ceremonies; and the human soul its sacrifice.’*⁴ Swamiji was a visionary and told it with emphasis that such a thing would never happen if only India understood what she is and what is Her role to play in the universe.

Look at the call which Swamiji gave to the people, especially, the youth of his Motherland – *‘India must conquer the world, and nothing less than that, is my ideal. It may be very big, it may astonish many of you, but it is so. We must conquer the world or die...therefore, children of the Aryans do not sit idle; **Awake, Arise and Stop not till the goal is reached.***’⁵

Swamiji was blessed with clarity in vision, logic in thinking and persuasive thrust in expression. Just look at one example – what is Hinduism and what is Secularism? Let me share only a few lines with you. *“My religion is to learn. I read my Bible better in the light of your Bible and the dark prophecies of my religion become brighter when compared with those of your prophets. Truth has always been universal. If I alone were to have six fingers on my hand while all of you had only five, you would not think that my hand was the true intent of nature, but rather that it was abnormal and diseased. Just so with religion. If one creed alone were to be true and all the others untrue, you would have a right to say that religion was diseased; if one religion is true, all the others must be true. Thus the Hindu religion is your property as well as mine.”*⁶ What is the message? Respect all religions of the world as equals but faith in your own and take pride in doing so.

² C.W.: vol. 3: 277, 105

³ C.W.: vol.4: 352-53

⁴ C.W.:vol.4: 347-48

⁵ C.W.: vol.3:316, 428

*Source of the above quotes – Swami Vivekananda, *Epoch-maker Spiritual Leader*, Swami Jitatmanananda

⁶ C.W.: Vol. 1:329

Whether leaders or followers, teachers or students, professionals or businessmen, nothing is of more relevance today than our own Swami Vivekananda. *'Self confidence, self respect and self help can, according to Vivekananda, enable student to be a good student, a lawyer to be a good and beneficial lawyer, a fisherman to be a good and honest fisherman. A man can do anything and be anything he likes - if he believes strongly in the infinite power of his soul. Infinite progress in any field can be attained if a man has this belief and self confidence'*⁷.

As to education and religion the ideology of Swamiji was very different from today's educationists and so called men of religion. He defined Education as *'the manifestation of perfection already in man'*. He defined Religion as *'the manifestation of Divinity already in man'*⁸.

We are celebrating 150th birth year of this great man, a great leader, a great Swami. Let me close by sharing an anecdote with you.

In good old times there was a king who was a noble ruler loved by his subjects. He was great indeed. He had a garden which was also a museum. Therein he had installed the statues of all great men of his times as also from recent history. He took pleasure in escorting every guest of his to the garden and telling him the name of the person and the qualities which had made him great. One day, a guest having taken round of the garden and having seen the good number of statues installed therein, asked of the king – Oh, the great king, why your statue is not here? You are much greater than many of those here'. The king smiled and replied – 'Dear one, I do not want my successors to keep on telling every visitor why my statue is here; I would ever love and enjoy it if the visitors here would ask - why my statue is not here?'

The celebration of 150th birth year of Swami Vivekananda would be fruitful and a real success if the thoughts, ideals and philosophy, knowledge and wisdom of Swami Vivekananda were so propagated in the masses that the people would start asking our leaders of the day as to why Swami Vivekananda is not our accepted role model today?

⁷ Kalyana Kalpataru: Vol. 58 No. 5, Feb 2013, p. 663

⁸ Kalyana Kalpataru: Vol. 58 No. 5, Feb 2013, p. 659