

Vivekananda and Science : Some Observations

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We associate childhood with innocence and a make-believe world. We cannot but be surprised when a child experiments with what his innocence asks him to believe. Let us begin with what a child showed us.

One day, his mother arranged a congregation where a priest narrated the story of the mythological god, Hanuman, who was a close confidant of Lord Rama. The child heard that Hanuman conquered death and is also fond of banana. It did not take much time to establish a cause-effect relationship and the child was there in a banana garden and waited hours there to come face-to-face with immortal Hanuman. The elders in the family had a tough time to bring the child home. The argument that worked was – Lord Rama might have sent Hanuman to some other place for some important work.

There were several *hookahs*, a kind of Indian smoking pipe, in their house. Each *hookah* was meant for people of a particular caste. Why so? The child was given the simple explanation that a person's caste is lost if he smokes from the *hookah* of another caste. What happened next? The child tried all the *hookahs* by himself but could not find how his caste got lost. It was not so simple for the father to explain to the child about social stratification.

No surprise that any round-about or evasive answer would not satisfy this child, Biley, when he attains youth as Narendra. His approach was straight and direct. 'Have you seen God? Can you show me God?' His questions went abegging till he got in touch with Sri Ramakrishna, who gave equally direct reply, and the answers were in the affirmative. The believer or non-believer self of us may or may not accept how the story unfolded in this realm thereafter. But we can see a pattern in the approach – seeking the truth, experimentation to arrive at it, getting an outcome that is repeatable, reproducible.

It was said that Sri Ramakrishna could not touch money. Was it just an attempt to glorify sainthood of the person? This young man secretly kept money under the bed when Ramakrishna was out of the room. On return the saint cried in pain when he sat on the bed, feeling a burning sensation. The embarrassed young man was encouraged by the saint and was told that he was well within his rights to scrutinize a saint. And such experimentation, clearing of doubts, continued till the last days of the Master on earth.

Enters Vivekananda on the world stage – fearless and confident. This fearlessness and confidence came from the way he grew up – taking the truth head on, through scientific inquiry and experimentation, even in the space of philosophy and religion – to make it a quest, to make it a scientific expedition of the internal world. It is he who could say: 'Religion is realization' and 'It is wrong to believe blindly. You must exercise your own reason and judgment.'

His lecture to an august European audience, more than a hundred years back, transcended the boundary of time and space: '...the world over, there have been fights

between secular knowledge and religious knowledge, the one claiming infallible authority as its guide, refusing to listen to anything that secular knowledge has to say on the point, the other, with its shining instrument of reason, wanting to cut to pieces everything religion could bring forward. This fight has been and is still waged in every country.'

And he knew what modern man was made up of. 'Believing certain things because an organized body of priests tells him to believe, believing because it is written in certain books, believing because his people like him to believe, the modern man knows to be impossible for him.'

The proof of pudding is in eating. Vivekananda was candid enough to separate the Religion with big 'R', the science of the inner man, which is universal, from religions with small 'r'. Every religion has three distinct components – philosophy – the substance, mythology – the anecdotes which make philosophy easy to understand and finally rituals – activities to make it a part of everyday routine. The aim is to go beyond ritual and mythology and embrace philosophy for attaining the Religion of 'being good and doing good'. That 'Unselfishness is God' or 'Unselfishness is more paying, only people do not have the patience to practise it' – does not appear obvious, as our selfish being looks for gratification here and now. And we need to go through this ritual, mythology, philosophy route in general, to discover our core.

And the problem lies where we get stuck up at ritual and mythology, which are not universal, unlike philosophy. It was another September 11. The year was 1893. The occasion was a congregation at Columbus Hall, Chicago, America. The event was the Parliament of Religions. And the world saw through Vivekananda the triumph of the noblest human quest and a character beyond borders and beliefs.

We heard a frank, fearless thirty year old who did not find it difficult to admit, 'Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.' In the concluding session of this meet he points out: 'If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.'

This is what we hear from Vivekananda. 'All science has its particular methods; so has the science of religion. It has more methods also, because it has more material to work upon. The human mind is not homogeneous like the external world. According to the different nature, there must be different methods. As some special sense predominates in a person – one person will see most, another will hear most – so there is a predominant mental sense; and through this gate must each reach his own mind. Yet through all minds runs a unity, and there is a science which may be applied to all. This science of religion is based on the analysis of the human soul. It has no creed.'

On his interaction with the famous scientist, Nikola Tesla, Vivekananda writes, 'Mr. Tesla thinks he can demonstrate mathematically that force and matter are reducible to potential energy. I am to go and see him next week to get this new mathematical demonstration. In that case the *Vedantic* cosmology will be placed on the surest of

foundations.’ Tesla did not succeed in his demonstration, but Einstein later in 1905 showed what Vivekananda was looking forward to – the relationship between *Akasha* (matter) and *Prana* (energy) according to *Vedantic* thought. In the words of Vivekananda (who passed away in 1902 before he crossed forty):

‘We have resolved the whole universe into two components, into what are called matter and energy, or what the ancient philosophers of India called *Akasha* and *Prana*. The next step is to resolve this *Akasha* and the *Prana* into their origin.’

‘Science today is telling us that all things are but the manifestation of one energy which is the sum total of everything which exists....’

Those who know about the last two decades of research in the new area of Neuroplasticity may wonder at the observation he made on the subject:

‘Every new thought that we have must make, as it were, a new channel through the brain... If we think, just for example's sake, that the mind is like a needle, and the brain substance a soft lump before it, then each thought that we have makes a street, as it were, in the brain... So with every fresh idea, we make a new impression in the brain, cut new channels through the brain-stuff...’

Vivekananda was well ahead his times. There are many such examples of his deep understanding of and foresight into the science of the external world. For the good of the deprived common man he also took keen interest in technological training, industrialization, scientific agriculture, and economics.

The famous Indian Institute of Science which the local people call “Tata Institute” was conceived by Jamshedji N. Tata. He was inspired by Vivekananda when they first met on a voyage in 1893. Five years later, Sri Tata sends a request to Vivekananda to head this institute as he found in this monk a scientific mind and the ability to lead an institute of science. Sri Tata wrote, ‘I trust, you remember me as a fellow-traveller on your voyage from Japan to Chicago. I very much recall at this moment your views on the growth of the ascetic spirit in India and the duty, not of destroying, but diverting it into useful channels.... I recall these ideas in connection with my scheme of Research Institute of Science for India, of which you have doubtless heard or read ... I am of opinion that if such a crusade in favour of an asceticism of this kind were undertaken by a competent leader, it would greatly help asceticism, science, and the good name of our common country; and I know not who would make a more fitting general of such a campaign than Vivekananda.’

Einstein, the Nobel laureate in science, said, ‘Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.’ We find in Vivekananda this great amalgamation. The famous British historian, AL Basham, prophesies ‘in centuries to come, he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world.’

In Vivekananda, we find a confluence of science and religion that clears confusion and removes the veil of ignorance. We return to an anecdote from the life of Vivekananda. There was a king in an Indian province, who, having been educated in the materialistic school, despised worship of gods and goddesses. He asked Vivekananda if it was not funny to worship idols made of clay, wood or stones and if people should not be dissuaded from doing so. In that hall, there was a portrait of the king hanging on the wall. Vivekananda asked one minister of the king to spit on that portrait and the minister was horrified at the very thought

of that. Why? Vivekananda explained that the portrait was not seen as cloth and colour pigments but as the king's projection. Similarly, idols are not viewed as clay or stone, but as projection of greats. And the king was not only convinced, but accepted Vivekananda as his teacher.

Only a seeker and an achiever can espouse such clarity. And this clarity takes the concept of worship further when we hear from him: 'This is the gist of all worship – to be pure and to do good to others. He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary.'

The way forward for us is not to make scientific approach compartmental and thereby lead a life of a denial. Let us embrace one such truth that we heard from Vivekananda and make our life a success: 'This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.'