

The Spirit of the Celebrations

The 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda is being celebrated in the country all around. The celebrations will go on for another year. Let us remember, in this context, what Sister Nivedita said on 10 January 1904 at a public meeting arranged at Belur Math to observe Swamiji's birthday: 'We have not assembled here to get lost momentarily in the exhilaration and exuberance of the celebrations. The celebration is arranged in order that we may acquire the power through which we may put our heart and soul to translate the teachings of Swamiji into action. What did he teach? Did he want that men should sing in his praise? No', replied Nivedita. 'We know that he hated name and fame from the bottom of his heart. Did he want that the name of his master Sri Ramakrishna be spread by all far and wide? No, he did not want that. Did he want that his special advices and methods of work be followed by all? No, he did not want that even. What did he want then?' Nivedita posed the question and said, 'he wanted all to stand upon their own feet and to be men.'

For the Mahamandal 'man-making' has been the watchword all along its forty-five years of existence. And we have been placing the ideal of Swami Vivekananda before the youths to emulate in order to build character. Yet, we place the principle before the person and take the person only as an embodiment of the principle. Regarding Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebration in 1894, Swamiji himself wrote to his brother disciples: 'It is a welcome news that Shri Ramakrishna's festival has come off with great éclat; the more his name is spread, the better it is. But there is one thing to know: Great sages come with special messages for the world, and not for name; but their followers throw their teachings overboard and fight over their names – *this is verily the history of the world*. I do not take into any consideration whether people accept his name or not, but I am ready to lay down my life to help his teachings, his life, and his message spread all over the world.' (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.6, p. 289)

Therefore, while we celebrate his birthday, we must exercise a little caution. We must not follow the same history and make a travesty of the great Flame of Sacrifice. While we need to place him before one and all from an urge to do good to all and the 150th birth anniversary is undoubtedly a befitting occasion for that, we must keep the spirit awake. In our sincere attempt to do his work, let us not be hoodwinked by our passions. The purpose and the means must be clear before our mind all the time. In our zeal to reach all youths by all means, we shall not make the mistake of adopting *any means*.

In his analysis of the spread of Buddhism, Swamiji said, 'The spread of Buddhism was less owing to the doctrines and the personality of the great preacher (Buddha), than to the temples that were built, the idols that were erected, and the gorgeous ceremonials that were put before the nation. Thus Buddhism progressed.... but later on the whole thing degenerated. It became a mass of corruption...' (*CW*, Vol.3, p.217). What was the result? Said Swamiji, 'India has not yet assimilated the work of Buddha. She is hypnotised by his voice, not made alive by it.' (*CW*, Vol.5, p.226). The danger looms large especially when politicians, heartless intellectuals, and fanatics take control. So, we must focus even more on assimilation of his

ideas in our life and character, instead of frittering away all the energy in any temporarily exciting event.

Swamiji's call must ring in our ears all the more: 'Young men..., my hope is in you. Will you respond to the call of your nation? Each one of you has a glorious future if you dare believe me. Have a tremendous faith in yourselves, like the faith I had when I was a child, and which I am working out now.'

And he said, 'This is the time to decide your future – while you possess the energy of youth, not when you are worn out and jaded, but in the freshness and vigour of youth. Work – this is the time.... Rouse yourselves, therefore, for life is short.... A far greater work (than ordinary, selfish pursuits) is this sacrifice of yourselves for the benefit of your race, for the welfare of humanity. What is in this life?' (CW, Vol.3, p.303-304)

This is the message for the young men and women of India – the message of strength and hope, the call for struggle and sacrifice. The nation is calling us to the duty of raising the masses still sunk in poverty and ignorance, the duty of building a united nation of men, not of brutes. Swamiji hoped that we would respond with all our might. He needed a handful of men, but with an audacious faith in their destiny. But how do we respond to him? – by taking a firm resolve to build our life and character first and then by giving as much of our life-energy as we can for the country. This is the work for which Swamiji asked us to be organized: 'Work among those young men who can devote heart and soul to this one duty – the duty of raising the masses of India. Awake them, unite them, and inspire them with this spirit of renunciation; it depends wholly on the young people of India.' (CW, Vol.5, p.78)

We must work to make the celebrations fruitful with this goal in view.