

Vivek-Jivan, January 2013

(Commemorative Volume: 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda)

EDITORIAL

The Power and The Prospect

A hundred and fifty years ago on the twelfth of January was born in Calcutta, then the capital of India, in an aristocratic family, a lad, Narendranath Dutta, who in the thirties of his life conquered the world with love and wisdom as Swami Vivekananda and left the mortal coil before he reached forty. Benoy Kumar Sarkar writes: ‘With five words he conquered the world, so to say, when he addressed men and women (at the Parliament of Religions) as “Ye divinities on earth! – Sinners?” The first four words summoned into being the gospel of joy, hope, virility, energy and freedom for the races of men. And yet with the last word, embodying as it did a sarcastic question he demolished the whole structure of soul degenerating, cowardice-promoting, negative, pessimistic thoughts. On the astonished world, the little five-word formula fell like a bomb-shell. The first four words he brought from the East, and the last word he brought from the West. All these are oft-repeated expressions, copy-book phrases both in the East and the West. And never in the annals of human thought was the juxtaposition accomplished before Vivekananda did it in the dynamic manner and obtained instantaneous recognition as a world's champion.’ It reminds one of a beautiful verse by Bhartrihari:

*‘Ekenāpi hi shurena pādākrāntam mahītaḷam /
Kriyate bhāskareneva sphārasphurita-tejasā.’*

– ‘The whole world is brought under full control by one single brave man by his valour, like the sun that sheds abundance of refulgent light.’

How did he acquire the power to accomplish it? It is a long story of hard struggle; it is difficult to imagine how hard it was. It was like a small boat tossing all the while on the bosom of a turbulent sea, yet crossing the vast span and reaching the shore, where the sun shines for ever and ever. Mysterious depths of knowledge thoroughly surveyed through incomparable erudition with the brilliance of intellect as that of a thousand mighty suns, matchless guidance of a peerless Master, who saw in him only Narayana, meticulous objective study of the mundane and the decadent spiritual life of his nation, not merely with the eye of an economic or political philosopher, but with a heart which bled at the sight of the least suffering of any being – all these three elements went to make what he was and endowed him with power that he wielded with ease for the good of one and all.

He said, ‘May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls – and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all

species, is this special object of my worship.’ Having planted his feet on the safe soil of sunshine across the sea, he could not feel satisfied. It so happens rarely with some great souls only, as observed by Shankaracharya :

*‘Shāntā mahānto nivasanti santo
Vasantavallokahitam charantah /
Tīrnāh svayam bhīmabhavāravam janān-
Ahetunānyānapi tārayantah.’*

There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed the dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever.

So he deeply felt for the suffering of humanity in bondage and under the weight of its concomitants and cried out calling: ‘Ye divinities of earth! – Sinners? It is a sin to call a man so. It is a standing libel on human nature.’ And he manifested true human nature in his life and teachings.

What sort was it? When Swami Vivekananda went to Oakland in 1900, one gentleman among many listened to him. ‘When he returned, he was very much excited and could scarcely contain his enthusiasm. He said, “I have met a man who is not a man; he is a God! And he spoke the truth!” ’ Josephine Macleod went to see her ailing brother when he was in his death bed. His hostess was in no way related to them. Josephine found a portrait of Swami Vivekananda over his bed. She asked the hostess, ‘Who is that man whose portrait is over my brother’s bed?’ ‘She drew herself up with all the dignity of her seventy years and said, “If ever there was a God on earth, this is the man.” ’ A lady, an agnostic, heard Vivekananda once and then went into a room and was weeping. Someone asked her the reason and she replied, ‘The man has given me eternal life. I never wish to hear him again.’ Sister Christine wrote, ‘Walking along the Fifth Avenue (in New York) one day, with two elderly forlorn devoted creatures walking in front, he said, “Don’t you see, life has conquered them!” The pity, the compassion for the defeated in his tone! Yes, and something else – for then and there, the one who heard prayed and vowed that never life should conquer her, not even when age, illness and poverty should come. And so it has been. His silent blessing was fraught with power.’

He taught only what he himself realized: the idea of the divinity and oneness of all that exists. All his ideas on education, religion, culture, social change, etc. revolve around this central conviction. Yet, for him it was not a mere doctrine, but the greatest truth that must be lived here and now. He felt oneness with all humanity and there had not been a drop of tear anywhere that missed to fall in his heart. He shunned all traces of selfish desires, even for *mukti*, and worked incessantly for the poor, the oppressed, the miserable. His panacea for all ills was: ‘Strength is medicine for the world’s disease.’ And he called forth the young, the strong, the brave to come forward to suffer and sacrifice for the good of the world.

His sole weakness, he said, was his love for the motherland. She was the ‘queen of his adoration’, for she discovered and held in her bosom the greatest truths of divinity and oneness of Man. He gave a master plan to reinvigorate her national life in all its aspects, for the sake of mankind as a whole. He said: ‘So long as even a dog in my country remains hungry, my only religion would be to feed it.’

He felt intensely for the millions of his countrymen, merged in hunger and illiteracy. He himself had to face the pangs of hunger after his father deceased. During his itinerant life in India, after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, often he had no food or hardly any, ‘the longest such period, as he once told Sister Nivedita, being five days – and was on the verge of death. Once the question arose in his mind whether he had a right to beg for food from the poor, for he thought he did nothing for them in return. In any case, thought he, if they could save an extra morsel of food, their children had a better claim upon it than he. One day, ... being in a mood like this, he walked on and on through a forest without food till he sank to the ground, fixing his mind on God. At night he saw a tiger approaching him and he felt happy at the prospect of giving his body to the animal, as Buddha is said to have done in one life and said within himself, “We are both hungry, let one of us at least be fed.” The beast, however, walked away.’ Sister Christine wrote, ‘One did not need to be told, but seeing him one knew that he would willingly have offered his flesh for food and his blood for drink to the hungry.’

Another day as Swami Vivekananda ‘lay at the point of death in a Himalayan glade under a rude thatch of dry branches’, he heard a voice say, ‘You will not die. You have a great work to do in the world.’ Once during a long journey by railway he came across a young man, who was under the spell of occultism. Swamiji was hungry and sat quietly. But the boy approached him and started conversion. The mists before his mind started shifting as words poured out from Swamiji’s mouth. Swamiji explained that spirituality had nothing to do with miracle mongering. The craze for psychic illusions was demoralizing the Indian nation. He went on: ‘What we need is strong common sense, a public spirit, and a philosophy and religion which will make us *men*.’ The boy felt inspired and offered food to Swamiji which he accepted.

When he reached the southernmost tip of India at Kanyakumari, he felt tempted to meditate on the rock across the sea, where Parvati as Kanya did her *tapasya* for Shiva. Not having a pie with him, he swam across the sea to reach the rock. This was not unnoticed, and when he came back, people asked him eagerly who he was and about his meditation. ‘He only said that he was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, about whom the whole world would soon hear. As regards his experiences on the rock, he only said that the thing in the search of which he had been wending both physically and mentally for years he had achieved on the spot.’

The search was for the way to India’s regeneration. To implement his plan of action, among other things, money was also needed. And how did money come to him? Just an instance: In 1893 at Chicago Swami Vivekananda was the guest at the home of Mrs. John B.

Lyon. Her granddaughter, Cornelia Conger, wrote long after, ‘When he (Vivekananda) began to give lectures, people offered him money for the work he hoped to do in India. He had no purse. So he used to tie it up in a handkerchief and bring it back – like a proud little boy – pour it into my grandmother’s lap to keep for him. She made him learn the different coins and to stack them up neatly to count them.’

In April 1902 about three months before he passed away, he said, ‘I have nothing in the world. I haven’t a penny to myself. I have given away everything that has ever been given to me.’

From the shore of eternal sunshine, when he re-crossed the ocean in his small boat all alone, driven by a divine compassion for suffering mankind, it was no less turbulent and many a crest attempted to throw him off. Not only affection and admiration, hospitality and honour were in store for him, he had to face hostility of various mean and malign natures, to which he did not offer the least resistance, but he overcame them all. He did not seek any, but name, fame, money came to him kissing his feet, and temptations dangled about. Cornelia Conger wrote in her reminiscences: ‘Swamiji was such a dynamic and attractive personality that many women were quite swept away by him and made every effort by flattery to gain his interest. He was still young and, in spite of his great spirituality and his brilliance of mind, seemed to be very unworldly. This used to trouble my grandmother who feared he might be put in a false or uncomfortable position, and she tried to caution him a little. Her concern touched and amused him, and he patted her hand and said, “Dear Mrs. Lyon, you dear American mother of mine, don’t be afraid for me. It is true I often sleep under a banyan tree with a bowl of rice given me by a kind peasant; but it is equally true that I also am sometimes the guest in the palace of a great Maharaja and a slave girl is appointed to wave a peacock feather fan over me all night long! I am used to temptation, and you need not fear for me.’

Do we not remember the incident at Khetri, where he blessed the singer (a nautch girl) ‘who from that day gave up her profession and entered the path leading to perfection’? Madame Calve wrote in her reminiscences, ‘One day we lost our way in Cairo. I suppose, we had been talking too intently. At any rate, we found ourselves in a squalid, ill-smelling street, where half-clad women lolled from windows and sprawled on doorsteps.

‘The Swami noticed nothing until a particularly noisy group of women on a bench in the shadow of a dilapidated building began laughing and calling to him. One of the ladies of our party tried to hurry us along, but the Swami detached himself gently from our group and approached the women on the bench.

‘“Poor children!” he said, “Poor creatures! They have put the divinity in their beauty. Look at them now!”

‘He began to weep. The women were silenced and abashed. One of them leaned forward and kissed the hem of the robe, murmuring brokenly in Spanish, “*Humbre de Dios, Humbre de Dios!*” (Man of God!) Another, with a sudden gesture of modesty and fear, threw

her arm in front of her face as though she would screen her shrinking soul from those pure eyes.’

And of name and fame? ‘When he returned to his hotel the night after the first meeting of the Parliament, he wept like a child. Their lavish hospitality made him sick at heart when he remembered the crushing poverty of his own people. His anguish became so intense one night that he rolled on the floor, groaning: “O Mother, what do I care for name and fame when my motherland remains sunk in utmost poverty? To what a sad pass have we poor Indians come, when millions of us die for want of a handful of rice, and here they spend millions of rupees upon their personal comfort! Who will raise the masses of India? Who will give them bread? Show me, O Mother, how I can help them.”’

Even before he launched his open offensive at the Parliament of Religions, he wrote in a letter: ‘Gird up your loins, my boy. I am called by the Lord for this.... The hope lies in you – in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful.... Feel for the miserable and look up for help – it shall come. I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help. The Lord is great. I know He will help me. I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed.... Vow, then, to devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down every day.

‘... Glory unto the Lord, we will succeed. Hundreds will fall in the struggle, hundreds will be ready to take it up.... Faith, sympathy – fiery faith and fiery sympathy! Life is nothing, death is nothing, hunger nothing, cold nothing. Glory unto the Lord – march on, the Lord is our General. Do not look back to see who falls – forward – onward!’

The retrospect brings forth in dotted lines the personality that grew around the name, *Vivekananda*. It is difficult to view the detailed outline, but the image that can be visualized fills any serious mind with awe and admiration. We may certainly use his words in his own case and say: Vivekananda ‘is a force. You should not think that his doctrine is this or that. But he is a power, living even now and working in the world.’ We ‘saw him growing in his ideas. He is still growing.’ And he said, ‘I shall not cease to work.’

This takes us from the retrospect to the prospect of *Vivekananda*, *the Power*. This has been working and will work more vigorously in future, gradually entering into all minds and bringing about a vital transformation. It is and will be working everywhere as the Sixth Force in the universe. Not all or none will perhaps be able to identify this power with Vivekananda, yet it will work for invigorating man to strive for his destiny. Unnoticed it will work for directional corrections for the march of man. Unseen and unheard like the dew drops that fall at night, it will bring into blossom lives that will find fruition of their efforts in the happiness of the many. Between his two hundredth and two hundred-fiftieth birth anniversaries interpersonal and international relations will have undergone fundamental changes; every

thought will pass through the filter – ‘Not I, but thou’ – and the only policy that will be applauded will be the good of the many. The mean sense of differences will gradually get blunted and the idea of universal unity will be ascending in the sway of this power. Recognition of the dignity of man will be supreme. Special privileges and differentiation in the matter of opportunities will become things of the past. Materialistic ideas will be buried in the earth and will become a subject for historical probe. The pulse of spirituality will be felt everywhere.

Lack of understanding and the voice of criticism that became audible from the time this power began to grow and have still been trying to make their presence felt, often outstripping the bounds of decency, will have been silenced much earlier. Many will correct their mistakes and many more will never commit them. Understanding and acceptance is already drawing a constantly ascending curve.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century one day, in a prophetic mood, Vivekananda startled those around him by saying, ‘The next great upheaval which is bring about a new epoch will come from Russia or China.’ And it came both in Russia and China to the discomfiture of other calculations by propounders of social theories. Whatever materialistic intellectual giants might say, a radical examination of the recent changes in the world would reveal to intelligent minds that this power is at work, call it Vivekananda, Vedanta or anything you like. It will also bring great changes in India, but it will take more time, for the inertia here is tremendous.

The power will work in the world to remould man and his destiny is spite of our lukewarmness. But work done by a force is inversely proportional to the resistance it has to overcome. The question of positive resistance does not arise. Our half-hearted acceptance of and wordy eulogies on the power work as resistance; they only slow down its working. We can accelerate the process by our willing acceptance and through deliberate action ensuring our own involvement.

Each of us should acquire the honesty and courage to say with Martha Brown Fincke: ‘I often think of the time I have lost, of the roundabout way I have come, groping my way, when under such guidance I might have aimed directly for the goal. But for an immortal soul it is wiser not to spend time in regret, since to be on the way is the important thing.’ When shall we be able to say with Sister Devamata: ‘The time of hearing was over, the time of pondering and practising had come’?

Said Swami Vivekananda: ‘I have given you advice enough; now put at least something in practice. Let the world see that your ... listening to me has been a success.’

This is the prospect of this power, in which lies the dormant destiny of man. O Man! ‘Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached!’

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