

The Awakener of Strength

Swami Vivekananda was always emphatic on an energetic approach to everything. He himself was the embodiment, as it were, of indomitable, inexhaustible strength. He abhorred unmanliness and cowardice.

He was born at a time when the millennium-long slumber of our country started to get disturbed due to foreign rule. It was some sort of an awakening by the half, a kind of confusion bolstered by the self-demeaning stance of Indian intellectuals, produced by the education given by the foreign rulers and the hypnotic effect of the brilliance of their post-renaissance advances in science, arts, politics, and economic matters as well as their imperial success. Educated and wealthy Indians began reform movements of various shades, but each of these lacked a sense of national pride and dignity and deep concern for the masses. All major political ideas boiled down to this: The British rule is unquestionably for our good, and we must kneel down before the rulers and politely beg for what we need. The poor, the ignorant, the oppressed hardly ever found a place in any of their schemes. The masses and the women in particular were oppressed for ages, economically, morally, and in every other possible way, by their countrymen – priests and *zamindars* alike – and by the foreigners. As an itinerant monk in his twenties, when he moved from village to village on the plains and hills and jungles, Swamiji was the first educated man to come face to face with the *real India* of modern times. He became one with the masses and felt their agony with all his heart. He searched and found the root cause of their problems and the solution.

Swami Vivekananda's diagnosis and prescription were simple: 'For centuries people have been taught theories of degradation. They have been told that they are nothing. The masses have been told all over the world that they are not human beings. They have been so frightened for centuries, till they have nearly become animals.... Let them have faith in themselves, for what makes the difference between the Englishman and you? Let them talk their religion and duty and so forth. I have found the difference. The difference is here, that the Englishman believes in himself and you do not. He believes in his being an Englishman, and he can do anything. That brings out the God within him, and he can do anything he likes. You have been told and taught that you can do nothing, and nonentities you are becoming every day. What we want is strength, so believe in yourselves.... Make your nerves strong. What we want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel. We have wept long enough. No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be men. It is a man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. It is man-making education all round that we want.'

Education is the panacea of all our ills, he said. He wanted to spread education to every pore of society. Not the kind of education we get at our schools and colleges. It has to be 'man-making' education. The main aim of education would be to make brave men and women of developed brain and brawn, with a heart that feels for others, and with the kind of strength that enables one to 'face the brute'.

He uttered truths fearlessly to dispel weakness: 'Stand up and fight! Not one step back; that is the idea.... Fight it out, whatever comes. Let the stars move from the sphere! Let the whole world stand against us! Death means only a change of garment. What of it? Thus fight! You gain nothing by becoming cowards.... Taking a step backward, you do not avoid any misfortune. You have cried to all the gods in the world. Has misery ceased? The masses in India cry to sixty million gods, and still die like dogs. Where are these gods?... The gods

come to help you when you have succeeded. So what is the use? Die game.... This bending the knee to superstitions, this selling yourself to your own mind does not befit you, my soul. You are infinite, deathless, birthless. Because you are infinite spirit, it does not befit you to be a slave.... Arise! Awake! Stand up and fight!

His work was concentrated on opening up the floodgates of infinite strength latent in every man, woman, and child. Once this faith is awakened and the power flows out to be applied in every field of life, it will, in course of time, take care of all problems waiting to be solved. The awakener of strength of the human soul naturally could not compromise with any source of weakness, be it so called religious belief, social hierarchy or political power.

The greatest strength, he knew, is love. So he preached love – boundless as the ocean. But he never confused it with the pretension of the weak. The strong alone can sacrifice the little self for the sake of all. The strong alone can be fearless and expect nothing in return. Thus the strong alone can truly love. For the rest a gradual upcoming was his prescription. So he did not preach the softness of *bhakti* and absolute *ahimsā* for the masses, which are impossible ideals except for a few. So he stressed *rajas* instead – immense energy expressing itself in intense activity. He said, ‘What we should have is what we have not, perhaps what our forefathers even had not –that which the *Yavanas* had; that, impelled by the life-vibration of which, is issuing forth in rapid succession from the great dynamo of Europe, the electric flow of that tremendous power vivifying the whole world. We want that. We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self-reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement. Checking a little the constant looking back to the past, we want that expansive vision infinitely projected forward; and we want – that intense spirit of activity (*Rajas*) which will flow through our every vein, from head to foot.’ ‘We want now the spirit of the brave warrior in the battlefield of life, and not of the wooing lover who looks upon life as a pleasure-garden!’

This spirit gave birth to our freedom struggle. Let it now work through us for rebuilding India and for raising the masses who are still in misery.