

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S GIFT TO THE WEST

SWAMI PURNATMANANDA

[Also as : *Propagation of India's message to the west by Swami Vivekananda*—without the last para here, published in Asiatic Society, Vol.XXXVI, No.3, p.155]

It is commonly said that Swami Vivekananda went to the West to preach religion. Several years ago I met Hemchandra Ghosh, a great revolutionary who was the founder and the supreme commander of 'Bengal Volunteers', a renowned revolutionary organisation of the pre-independence era. He was then ninety eight years old. He was perhaps the oldest Indian freedom fighter alive at the time. He made a very significant statement: "I don't think Swami Vivekananda went to the west to preach religion. If he had gone there to preach anything, it was India. Vivekananda went to the west to preach India, to propagate the India Eternal."

There had been several objects of Vivekananda's going forth to the West, but the principal object was perhaps to disseminate India's message to the people of the West. Before he left for America to participate in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, he was confident that India had a message for the West and he was to deliver that message. He said that the west had need of that message for their health and for their survival. And his greatest gift to the Western world was this message of India.

Now what is India's message to the West? It is in one single word, Vedanta, according to Swami Vivekananda. According to Swami Vivekananda again the essence of India's message boils down to the following four principles which are interdependent: 1) Unity of Religions, 2) Unity of man, 3) Divinity of man and, 4) Immortality of the Spirit. In other words, Swamiji characterised the spirit of India with four key words: Unity, Fraternity, Divinity and Immortality. To him India was not simply a land of religion and spirituality, India to him stood for an idea, India to him was a symbol of perfection and highest excellence of man's achievement.

At his first appearance at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago Swamiji made it clear that Religion is one but religions? are many. Centuries ago, the Rigveda proclaimed : truth is one, sages describe it variously : *Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti.*¹ Sri Krishna reiterated it and other seers and sages also did the same. Therefore attempts to divide man in the name of religion are wrong and untenable. He called upon to cease from abusing other religions and to break own the barriers of their respective little worlds, to do away of the mentality of the 'frog in the well'. The real unity of religions, Vivekananda said, could be achieved only through the understanding of the concept from the spiritual standpoint. The principle of unity of religions that India realised are based on the attitudes of universal tolerance and universal acceptance. On the strength of this Indian seers sought to turn the world into a single family : *Yatra Vishvam Bhabati Ekaniram.*² Swamiji said that this message of unity and harmony was India's original gift to the world.

It is true that the Parliament of Religions in Chicago played a significant role in facilitating the study of comparative religions as an academic discipline in the West, but it was Swami Vivekananda who contributed more than anyone in the Parliament in projecting and embodying the spirit and temper needed for the purpose. By doing that he actually reflected the typical Indian genius to see the underlying unity in diversity. It is true that before his advent in America and Europe, the Western soil was prepared to some extent to receive India's message, thanks to the contributions of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman in America and Charles Wilkins, William Jones, Goethe, Colebrooke, Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Paul Deussen and Max Muller in Europe. There were others and some institutions also that were responsible for creating interest in India and Indian thought. But it was left for Vivekananda to hand over the unique gift of India to the

West—the concept of a universal religion based on the message of Vedanta, the idea of the future religion of the world which would neither be Hinduistic nor Buddhistic, neither Christian nor Mohammedan, but “the sum total of all these” and yet with “infinite space for development.”³

The principle of unity of Religions is dependent upon the principle of the unity of man. We may remember in this connection Swamiji’s wonderful words of address when he first appeared in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago : “Sisters and Brothers of America”. We are all aware of the tremendous effect it created at the Parliament. Was it because of its oratorical import and charisma? No, it was because of the force of Vivekananda’s own realisation of the unity of man. He verily looked upon the people present there as his own sisters and brothers, the members of one single family, i.e., humanity. In his addresses at the Parliament of Religions as well as elsewhere in America or Europe, Swamiji spoke eloquently of India’s message of the oneness of man and his voice came out from the depth of his Advaitic realisation : How can a man do any harm to his brother or sister? How can a man do any harm to himself? How can a man hate himself? Vivekananda made the people of the West aware of the wonderful realisation of the Vedic seers manifest in the glowing words of Isha Upanishad : “*Yastu sarvani bhutani atmani eva anupashyati sarvabhuteshu cha atmanam tato na bijugupsate.*”

Vivekananda realised one hundred years ago that the worst problem that stands in the way of establishing peace and harmony in the world are the attitude of intolerance, of selfishness, of sectarianism and of dogmatism. These attitudes and sentiments are the products of our inability to discover the golden thread of unity between man and man, between religion and religion, between nation and nation. He urged that India’s message of unity of man could only put an end to the forces of disintegration and disharmony.

Swami Vivekananda made the people of the West aware of the wonderful realisation of the Indian seers that man was never a child of sin but a child of immortality. He proclaimed : man is potentially divine. Divinity is his real nature. Man is not just a man, man is God Himself, even greater than God. India’s Vedanta proclaimed that the greatest lie was to call man ‘man’—they were ‘the highest Gods’ in the universe. We are reminded in this connection of Swamiji’s great words of hope and enthusiasm : “Children of immortal bliss—heirs of immortal bliss!... Ye divinities on earth... sinners! It is a sin to call a man so. It is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; you are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.”⁴ This declaration of the original divinity and original purity was completely opposed, to the much trumpeted Biblical doctrine of man’s Fall and the doctrine of the Original Sin. Swamiji assured that fall or error is never the final word about man, because man has infinite potentialities. He used to say : Look at the cow, the cow never tells a lie, but it remains a cow all the time. Look at the wall. Did the wall ever steal? Never. It is always the wall. Man tells lies, man steals, but it is man and man alone who can overcome his limitations and lacunas and can transform and transfigure himself into a God by awakening his latent powers. Swamiji said it was religion which offered man that inspiration to outgrow, to develop to travel through odds and obstacles, and finally to bring out the Buddha-man out of the brute-man. According to Vivekananda the whole process is a process of unfoldment of inner powers and potentialities. It is “only a travelling, a coming up through various conditions and circumstances” till it evolves “a God out of the material man.” Therefore Swami Vivekananda concludes : “To the Hindu man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower truth to higher truth.”

Swamiji, however, said that the concept of divinity of man was not a concept to which India could claim her copyright since the concept was there in every religion indirectly. But the credit of India lay in her open declaration of it in all her scriptures and through the utterances of her sages and seers over the centuries. It was the genius of India again that realised the distinction between religion and rituals. Religion is never rituals. Religion is man’s hunger for perfection,

Religion is “being and becoming”. It is only a process, a science to manifest the divinity already within. Doctrines or dogmas, temples or churches, scriptures and rituals are not essential parts of religion. They are only “secondary details”. Even if a person does not attach himself to any church, or subscribe himself to a particular creed, or perform any ritual or read any scripture, he or she can be religious if he or she is good and does good to others, if he or she is honest and unselfish, if he or she is bold and firm against the temptation of reward or threat of punishment and even death for the truth he or she believes in.

The other message of India which could be designated as India’s singular discovery is the deathlessness of the Spirit. India declares : it is the body that dies, the Spirit never dies or gets destroyed. Swami Vivekananda placed before the people of the West this unique message of India. India believes that the highest achievement of man is to reach the knowledge of his own self, of Atman, the undying and immortal Spirit. The Atman alone is permanent, all other things are impermanent. When a person attains the knowledge of the Self, he realises that all religions are but “varied expressions of the Religion which is Oneness”;⁵ he realizes that man is divine and the Spirit is immortal; he realizes that man is one, no matter what country or religion he belongs to.

These noble truths of India were realized centuries ago through the tremendous experiments undertaken by her sages and seers and it was left to Swami Vivekananda to make them known in bold and clear terms to the people of the West in modern times. Swami Vivekananda declared that the message of India contained in itself the panacea for the frustrating problems the West was confronted with in spite of her wonderful attainments in the field of science and technology and in the domain of material prosperity. He warned that unless the West turn their attention to the spiritual message of India, its whole foundation would crumble to pieces.⁶ The two Great Wars pointed out how correctly he diagnosed the disease the West had been subjected to. Romain Rolland in his *Jean Cristof* : “The West is burning but I see other lights rising from the depths of the Orient”. And this “light of Orient” is the light of India, the message of India which was offered to the West by Swami Vivekananda towards the end of the last century. Arnold Toynbee echoed Romain rolland when he categorically declared that “the Indian way” offered the “only substitute” to the total annihilation of the human race in modern times. After the death of Swamiji in 1902, America paid her tribute with these words which appeared in ‘Pacific Vedantin’ of August 1902 : “Vivekananda has shaken the whole world with his sublime thoughts, and they will echo down through the halls of time until time shall be no more.”⁷

Swami Vivekananda was not an ‘Orientalist’ or ‘Indologist’ as we commonly understood by such terms. Orientalists or Indologists are usually designated as “revivalists”. Their principal interest lies in reviving or restoring the ancient heritage of the East or of India. The modern heritage of East or of India does not perhaps attract their interest. For them Sanskrit or Hebrew are only rich languages of the past and now they are dead or dying languages. Similarly, the ancient heritage of India and the East are important as they testify to the richness of thought and culture the East attained in the olden times. Their whole interest lies it seems in their curio value only. This attitude has been castigated by Swamiji as selfish and narrow. To him Sanskrit stands for prestige so far as India is concerned. Neither Sanskrit nor the ancient heritage of India are of curio value to him. They are very much living and pulsating in his estimation and they are very much essential for the making of the modern as well as future India. Vivekananda was certainly a revivalist in his untiring efforts to project and propagate the wealth of ancient India in particular and of the East in general. But he did not confine his attention and interest in revival or restoration only, he was equally eager to extend his interest for modern times as well as for future. He was for reconstruction of the modern and of the future taking into account of the best of the past and olden heritage. Thus he introduced ‘glasnost’ (openness) and ‘perestroika’ (reconstruction), to use the recently known Soviet terms, in the field of the Oriental and Indological studies. This dynamism of approach was the new contribution of Swami

Vivekananda to the Oriental and Indological studies. Sister Nivedita beautifully writes in this connection : “Nothing was less in his mind, be it understood, than a mere revival, or restoration of the Indian past. It was to those who sought to bring this about that he had referred, when he said, ‘Like the Egyptologist’s interest in Egypt, their interest in India is a purely selfish one. They would fain see again that India of their books, their studies, and their dreams’. What he himself wanted to see the strength of that old India finding new application and undreamt-of expression, in the new age.”⁸

Finally, the propagation of India’s message by this “Warrior-prophet of India” to quote Romain Rolland, left a profound mark upon the West.⁹ Prof. A. L. Basham, the celebrated Indologist, remarked that Vivekananda stands out as a giant figure in the history of the world for initiating “counter-attack from the East.”¹⁰

A few years ago, in 1988 a book has been published in America. The author of the book is an American lady—a scholar of repute—Mrs. E. Stark. Title of the book is beautiful—‘The Gift Unopened’. It is about Vivekananda’s visit to America and his impact in the West. She says that Swami Vivekananda gave to the West the wonderful gift of Vedanta in practice. America and West are yet to appreciate the magnitude and dimension of this gift. It as it were still remains unopened. Another gift of Vivekananda is that in his message of love and brotherhood he actually strengthened the dream and idea of the founding fathers of America, which the American themselves forgot and which remained till then, as it were, ‘unopened’ to them. Mrs. Stark says that Columbus discovered the soil of America, but the soul of America remained undiscovered till Swami Vivekananda appeared in the Parliament of Religion in Chicago. □

SOURCE

1. Rig-Veda, 1.164.46
2. Tattiriya Aranyaka, 10.1.3
3. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I, 14th Edn., 1972, p. 19
4. Ibid., p. 11
5. Ibid., Vol. VI, 9th Edn., 1972, p. 416
6. Ibid., Vol. III, 11th Edn., 1973, p. 159
7. Swami Vivekananda in the West : New Discoveries—Marie Louise Burke, Vol. VI, 1987, p. 222
8. The Master As I Saw Him—Sister Nivedita, 9th Edn., 1963, pp. 240-241
9. The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel—Romain Rolland, 9th imprn., 1979, p. 5
10. Swami Vivekananda in East and West, Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, London, p. 214

