

## Swami Vivekananda and the Emergence of India through Spiritual Culture



'Now and then, at long intervals of time, a being finds his way to this planet who is unquestionably a wanderer from another sphere; who brings with him to this sorrowful world some of the glory, the power, the radiance of the far distant region from which he came... He shares the life of those about him, enters into their joys and sorrows, rejoices with them, mourns with them, but through it all, he never forgets who he is, whence he came, or what the purpose of his coming. He never forgets his divinity. He remembers that he is the great, the glorious, the majestic Self...Such a being is beyond all comparison, for he transcends all standards and ideals. Others may be brilliant, his mind is luminous, for he had the power to put himself into immediate contact with the source of all knowledge...Others may be great, they are great only as compared with those in their own class. Others may be good, powerful, gifted, having more of goodness, more of power, more of genius than their fellowmen. It is only a matter of comparison. A saint is more holy, more pure, more single-minded than ordinary men. But with Swami Vivekananda there could be no comparison. He was in a class by himself. He belonged to another order. He was not of this world. He was a radiant being who descended from another, a higher sphere for a definite purpose,' said Sister Christine about her Guru Swami Vivekananda.

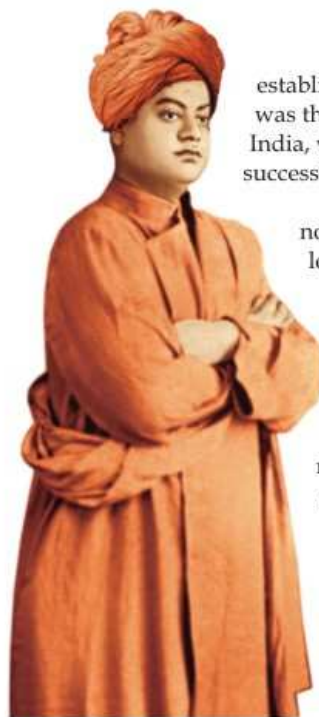
To introduce the life of Swami Vivekananda is to introduce the subject of spiritual life itself. Indeed, his life revealed throughout, the glory of the supersensuous life. All the intellectual struggle, all the doubts, all the burning faith, all the unfolding process of spiritual illumination were revealed in him. He was a manifold personality, a spiritual colossus, who, not satisfied with his own spiritual unfoldment, intensely strove for the good of all. Whatever he did or spoke, it was for the salvation of India, for the removal of the misery of the world, and above all, how every human being could get the knowledge of his divinity. His message was, therefore, not for one time, but for all times - not for one country, but for whole humankind, not for one aspect of life, but for all aspects of human existence.

The light of the world dawned for the first time upon the future Swami Vivekananda on Monday, January 12, 1863 (*Makara Sankranti day*), a few minutes before sunrise. He had been born to usher in a new age of glory for his country, who was to reorganize the spiritual and national consciousness of India, and who was to become a great apostle - preaching unto the world another gospel of redemption, namely the message of Vedanta. And only a few miles north of Calcutta, in the garden of Dakshineswar, his would be Master Sri Ramakrishna, was waiting for the coming of this babe, who was to grow into manhood to carry on his great work. Speaking about this, Sister Nivedita wrote: 'I see in him (Swami Vivekananda) the heir to the spiritual discoveries and religious struggles of innumerable teachers and saints in the past of India and the world, and at the same time the pioneer and prophet of a new and future order of development... I believe that each trace of those higher and uncommon modes of thought and

Swamiji's return to India after his successful mission to the West and the tremendous enthusiasm it generated at the time were unique events even in the long history of India. For a thousand years India had been subjected to foreign invasions and foreign rule. The last and the most significant of these was the British occupation of India. A company of merchants coming from far across the seas and defeating, with their comparatively small forces, the big armies of powers that were considered mighty and invincible for centuries, and organising a government that was efficient and law-enforcing, had a stunning effect on the classes and the masses of India. Above all, familiarity with the culture and the language of these new conquerors brought the intellectuals of the country face to face with a system of thought and ways of organisation which impressed them as far superior to anything they had indigenously. This resulted in cultural submission and an abject imitative spirit as also a total condemnation of India's past. All the signs of a cultural decadence, leading to cultural death, began to come to the surface.

Swami Vivekananda's appearance on the world scenario was the first sign of the awakening of India from the stupor into which it had fallen before and after the British conquest, into a consciousness of its identity as a nation and its importance in the comity of nations. Swamiji's tremendous success in the West as an exponent of the spiritual message of India was a surprising shock to the detractors of Indian culture and a stimulating leaven to its enthusiastic protagonists. India, it was felt, was not certainly face to face with its cultural doom when a pure and authentic exponent of it could draw so much of acclamation at the hands of the races that dominated the world at the time. It resulted in the resuscitation of the national sense of self-respect.

Besides, in Swami Vivekananda the whole country saw a common leader—their man, irrespective of the language or region, who represented their ideals and aspirations. So the whole country joined in giving him a reception of a magnitude that India had never witnessed before. The welcome took almost the shape of a mass movement. The whole of his journey from Colombo to Almora had the appearance of a triumphal march representing a national revival, and not merely that of functions organised for honouring a religious personality. After the



Both the photos on this page were taken at Colombo in January 1897

establishment of the British power in India, this was the first stirring of the spirit of nationalism in India, which was finally to lead through successive stages to Indian Independence in 1947.

In the course of his journey from Colombo northwards, Swamiji delivered several lectures all of which are now embodied in the volume '*Lectures From Colombo to Almora*'. This volume is a perennial source of patriotic inspiration, scintillating with the great spiritual ideals of the nation.

In these lectures he exhorted Indians not to condemn their social and cultural past and take to a life of imitation of the West. That is the way to sure and certain doom. Nor should they merely exalt the past and refuse to move forward. That is the way to stagnation and decadence. India has a glorious heritage. In religion and philosophy it has been the teacher of the world all through the ages. It retains its genius in this respect even today.

Revival of spirituality has always been the prelude to the revival of cultural and political life in India. For, spirituality is the soul of India. Its enhancement has always been the sure way to greatness, and its erosion, the way to national suicide.

From his study of world history, Swamiji expounded a theory regarding the survival of nations, and he applied it to explain the cause of India's survival in spite of all the disasters that threatened to destroy it. He maintained that human history shows that every nation has to make a contribution of its own in a chosen field for the general advancement of

humanity and that when it ceases to do so it decays and dies. Nature effaces it off to make way for more vigorous and younger races to take up the role. For, it is Nature's practice to get rid of an atrophied part of an organism and let others take up its function. Thus there have been great nations in the past, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans etc., whose civilisations were parallel in time with that of India. But they have all disappeared from the face of the earth and the regions where they flourished are now occupied by people whose culture and national histories have no continuity with those of these ancient people. The reason for it, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the fact that they ceased to fulfil their national purpose, which were mostly political, social, military etc. After short periods of vigorous national life, they lost their hold on the national theme, which made them great, and this led to their gradual decay and ultimate destruction at the hands of more



India always had a national theme through the whole of its history, the beginnings of which are beyond the capacity of man to reckon. That theme of India's specialisation is spirituality, which means the adoption of ways of life that lead to an immediate perception of the truth of the Atman and of God, even in this embodied state. All through her history, in spite of invasion and foreign subjugation, India has been producing men with this spiritual insight, and from this country have gone forth waves of movements that have brought spiritual light and wisdom to the nations of the world.

Even today, India retains this capacity. It was during the early days of British occupation, when India was threatened with cultural effacement at the hands of the victorious West, that the greatest of our spiritual men was born in the person of Sri Ramakrishna. Thus, in spite of political subjection and economic impoverishment, India has all through the ages been keeping itself alive as a nation, as is evident from the abundance of its vitality in this, its chosen field of specialisation. The moment India abandons its spiritual ideal, its national life will be threatened with imminent extinction.

This insistence on the spiritual ideal does not mean that in Swamiji's scheme of national reconstruction there is no place for the eradication of poverty and improvement of man's material life. He used to say that it is no good preaching spiritual doctrines to hungry stomachs. In India poverty is not the wretchedness of want but the non-covetous and non-possessive attitude of mind of the sage, rich in the wealth of the Spirit. The spiritual upliftment of man therefore includes the upliftment of the material conditions of his life. So in his Indian lectures we find powerful exhortations by Swamiji for the improvement of the living conditions of people in India, but at the same time warnings too against making material comfort and a high standard of living the be-all and end-all of life, as has been done in the West. Dharma (morality), Artha (wealth and power), Kama (pleasure), and Moksha (liberation) — have all been recognised by Indian scriptures as values relevant to human life. But the pursuit of them must be regulated in a way that the fulfilments they offer ultimately lead to Moksha. Spiritual values are the ultimate. Material values are desirable to the extent they subserve and help the development of the former, but are never ends in themselves.

In his '*Lectures from Colombo to Almora*' Swamiji also warns Indians to ply their national ship very carefully between the two sources of danger, the Scylla of Western



materialism and the Charybdis of Eastern obscurantism. Spirituality is cultivation of the great ideals taught in the Vedas in such a way that they are reflected in our individual and national life. The practice of village customs, caste rules, don't-touchism, irrational usages in eating and drinking — these have nothing to do with spirituality. Social rules and practices have changed from time to time. They do not represent the eternal values. Too much insistence on these externals to the detriment of the real and eternal spiritual principles expounded in the Upanishads, have been the main baneful influence that has been vitiating the life of the people. When Swamiji exhorts us to retain our hold on our spiritual ideals, he is not

asking us to relapse into this nightmare of social and religious obscurantism, but to be forward-looking and to go ahead without forgetting the great teachings of the Vedanta. We have to learn plenty from the West in the fields of organisation, science, politics and technology for the improvement of our social and economic conditions. Our deficiency in these respects is largely the result of the mania for exclusiveness and avoidance of contact with the external world that crept into the soul of the nation at some time in its history. When the world marched forward in science and technology, India remained smug in its own shell, glorifying itself in its don't-touchism, caste obsession and kitchen religion. This kind of orthodoxy should go, and the progressive spirit of the West captured, without losing our moorings in the Vedas. Progressiveness must be informed and directed by sensitiveness to spiritual values.

We have to assume a more active role in generating among the growing generation an awareness of religion in the right perspective suited to a multi-racial and multi-religious society like that of India. The followers of different religions should be exposed to the best presentation of religions other than theirs. This will enable the growing generations to understand the strength and greatness of all religions, and thus prepare their minds to the acceptance of the validity of all religions and to the exclusion of fanaticism. The preservation of a healthy religious attitude is an absolute necessity, if spiritual values are to be preserved. If men eschew all spiritual values, human society will degenerate. In his '*Lectures from Colombo to Almora*' Swamiji has, therefore, warned the nation that if

