

Swami Vivekananda's Message for Today's Youth

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Introduction

We all know that revered Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj was one of the foremost soldiers in the army of Swami Vivekananda. Of this army Swami Vivekananda himself was the commander-in-chief. Revered Maharaj had moulded himself totally with the ideas and the spirit of Swami Vivekananda. He was known all over the world for that very spirit with which Swami Vivekananda had worked for the welfare of mankind. Today I have been asked to speak on Swami Vivekananda's ideas about *Sevā* and Service with special reference to his message for the Youth. Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj was himself an exemplar in this respect. We have seen him working passionately, day in and day out, for the good of the common people.

Demographic advantage

I remember, a few years ago our dear and honourable ex-president of India, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalamji was asked a question by a young man in a programme. He asked Dr Kalam: 'Sir, what are the major strengths of India, and what are its major weaknesses?' Instantly Dr Kalam answered: 'You are the strength of India'. And when he said 'You', he was referring to the youths of this country. The greatest asset of India today is the youth population. What about the weaknesses? Dr Kalam gave a beautiful answer. He said, 'A nation which

does not have a vision and a mission will be a weak country.' Both these answers are very significant. Interestingly, both of these are directly connected to the basic ideas of Swami Vivekananda. We all know that today India is among those few nations in the world which can be said to be the youngest country—youngest in the sense that the average age of an Indian today is, according to the available statistics, twenty-nine years. We have more than sixty-five percent of India's population below the age of thirty-five and more than fifty percent of India's population is beneath the age of twenty-five. Roughly speaking, we have eight hundred million youths who are below the age of thirty-five. This, indeed, is a massive demographic advantage which India has today. According to the experts, this demographic advantage is going to give India a demographic dividend. This is very important. Now, what is the meaning of 'demographic dividend?' It is a technical term. To put it simply, the economic growth of a country which is brought about by the change in its population's age set-up is what is referred to as demographic dividend. Today India is already reaping the benefits of this demographic advantage. We are fast moving towards becoming a five-trillion-dollar economy and this demographic advantage which we have today is going to last for the next three decades, till 2055, according to the experts. To have eighty

crore young men and women is a kind of demographic advantage which is not available to any other country of the world today. But how are we going to handle this massive youth force available to us at the present moment? There is no question of misusing it or not using it. We actually have only one option. We have to wisely handle it and it is this youth force which is going to catapult India into the number one position in the next few decades. But how is this going to become possible?

The vision and the mission

We all know that as a subject, India was extremely close to Swami Vivekananda's heart. His one passionate concern was India, India and India alone. He wanted to see India become once again a global leader, leading the entire world. Just now I referred to Dr Kalam's words. Swami Vivekananda again and again reminded us of the vision and mission of India. If you go and look into the history of this country, you will find that India has always existed solely for one purpose. There is an exclusive mission given to India and India alone by the Providence. That mission is to spiritualize the entire world. From time to time, in the past history, you will see whenever the situation demanded, India sent waves of spiritual thoughts across the world and transformed human lives in very radical ways. According to Swamiji, this is going to happen again in this and the coming centuries. That is the underlying reason of the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

So it is not that India does not have a vision. Only, we have forgotten it. Swami Vivekananda came to remind us once again of the great mission and vision of India, which is to spiritualize the entire world. Swamiji, for his part, knew this very clearly. He has spoken about the past glory of India and the

glory which India will be attaining in the future. This new glory, Swamiji says, will be so great that it will bedim all the past attainments. Such a scenario is very tempting for all of us, and we are really waiting to see that kind of India emerge. We can already see the signs of it. For this great development Swamiji had pinned all his hopes on the youths of this country, on the powers of the youth. He has left behind a treasure trove of ideas that can galvanize the youth of this time. One question that comes to mind is whether Swami Vivekananda could foresee the emergence of this demographic dividend which is available to India today. This question suggests itself to our mind because he had pinned such hopes on the youth of the country. His clarion call was addressed to the youth, for it is this demographic advantage that can shape India's destiny.

Swamiji, the prophet

So, perhaps, Swami Vivekananda had foreseen in the last decade of the nineteenth century the emergence of this kind of demographic advantage in the first half of the twenty-first century. We can presume in this way because Swami Vivekananda had foreseen many other things and he had made several predictions. We all know that each and every prediction of his has come true. I can give some examples. He spoke about a proletarians' state that will come on the world stage and had thus, in fact, predicted the rise of Russia. This he spoke in 1896. He had said, first Russia would rise, and then China and after China, India would rise and become the global leader. He had spoken about a Europe sitting on the verge of a volcano just waiting to erupt. This he had spoken in 1896, and, within less than two decades, the First World War broke out. He had spoken about Belur Math that this institution would be the centre from where the spiritual currents would emerge to

impact the world very radically. Thus we can see that each and every prediction made by Swami Vivekananda during his lifetime has come true. His foresight never went wrong. Similarly, on this ground, we can presume that Swami Vivekananda might have foreseen that in the beginning of the twenty-first century India would have a massive demographic advantage. During his lifetime, he had given some fiery ideas which moved the young men and women of his time, leading many of them to give up everything, all their personal interests, and fight for India's freedom from the British rule and within fifty years India became free. This was accomplished mainly by the youth population moulded by Swami Vivekananda's ideas about self-sacrifice and service to the nation.

The legacy

Today once again in the twenty-first century this is going to be repeated and this is happening. This we can see. Just a few days back I got an opportunity to take part in a programme organised by Vivekananda Yuva Maha-mandal. I was simply charmed to see thousands and thousands of young boys visibly inspired by Swami Vivekananda's ideas. This is just one instance. Today, in India, if you just care to look around, you will find any number of such institutions, working on the great ideas given by Swami Vivekananda, specially those addressed to the youth, inspiring them to dedicate their lives to the goal of building India as a great nation. Vivekananda believed in organization and in organised way of working. This is the great legacy which Swami Vivekananda has left behind.

Till we got independence, the young men and women of this country had an ideal before them and a common aim. So they worked in an organized manner and that

organized way of working actually brought about India's independence. But, unfortunately, immediately after the independence, this organized strength dissipated and withered away. People became once again selfish. They lost their nation-centredness. But in the last ten or fifteen years, once again, things are rapidly changing. Specially since the celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary in 2013, we can see that once again Vivekananda has become the centre of India's development. He is now very seriously discussed at all levels, right from the highest political seat in this country down to the local bodies. Once again Vivekananda is inspiring men and women at different levels.

Three important lectures

Here comes the important question as to how the present-day youths are to be infused with Vivekananda's ideas of *sevā* or service. For this is the need of the hour. What are his basic ideas? Now if we are to understand those basic ideas of Vivekananda as far as *sevā* is concerned, we have to read three important lectures given by him. All the three lectures are available in the book called *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. The Bengali translation of this book is *Bhārate Vivekananda* and the title of the Hindi translation is *Bhāratīya Vyākhyā*. It has been translated into almost all the major Indian languages. This is a very important book. Interestingly this is the one book which Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj used to recommend often to the youths of India. Every citizen of this country should read this book, if only to understand properly what India is, where lies the glory of Hindu *sanātana dharma* and how India can once again be built on the national lines, without imitating the West. In this book

there are three important lectures which I personally consider to be the most vital as far as our understanding of India and the idea of building India is concerned. These three lectures are 1) 'My Plan of Campaign'; 2) 'The Future of India'; 3) 'The Work Before Us'. These three lectures are, I should say, the very blueprint which Vivekananda had given to the Indian youth in particular and the Indian population in general, so that they could think about it, ruminate over it and mould themselves accordingly. These three beautiful lectures are without compare. Even today, these are so burning relevant.

The one thing that Swamiji is repeatedly saying is—sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice, *sevā, sevā, sevā*, service to the nation. How to build India? This is one theme that runs through all these three lectures. I very much wish that everybody—every politician, every bureaucrat, every technocrat, educators, parents-students, the laymen—should be educated in the light of these three lectures given by Swami Vivekananda. It is vital for India in the next three decades. As the saying goes, strike while the iron is hot. And this means bringing these burning ideas to the young generation of India today so that they can begin to mould themselves and dedicate their lives for building India anew.

If we look very carefully we find that Swami Vivekananda in these three lectures is talking about two ways in which the youth can live their lives. Either they can lead a very self-centred life or a life centred on nation-building. If they live a self-centred life and only worry about their personal ambitions, their personal comforts and pleasures, it will be a great waste of energy. Opposite to this is a nation-centred life, dedicated to the good of the nation. To have a life centred around divinity is the highest ideal. To serve others, with Divinity at the

centre of all work, is the highest goal. That is what our *śāshtras* talk about. That was what Vivekananda talked about. That was what Sri Ramakrishna talked about. But that kind of life may be slightly difficult for the average youths of the present day. It may be difficult but is definitely the first step towards selflessness.

We can live a nation-centred life as a first step and from there we can evolve into a life which is centred on Divinity. Swami Vivekananda had very strongly stressed the point that the youth of the country must learn to live a life which would be centred on the good of the nation. Often I feel that this journey, from a self-centred life to a nation-centred one, is the journey of man-making. Vivekananda again and again spoke about man-making. How is one going to become 'man'? Swami Vivekananda calls the selfish men brutes. A person who does not feel for others would be called *durātman* by Swami Vivekananda. A *mahātmā* is one whose heart bleeds for others. What a wonderful idea! How does this transformation become possible?

***Sevā* or Service**

Vivekananda insists on *Sevā*. Why? Vivekananda says, first of all, you should learn to feel for the suffering multitude. Of course, we have made huge progress in the last few decades, but we still have a long way to go. In my estimate, even today around fifteen to twenty percent of India's population is living below the poverty line. My figures may not be exactly right, but it is a fact that a considerable number of people live a hand-to-mouth existence. Swami Vivekananda had given the mantra—feel, feel, feel for these poor people. What can we do for them? Feel to the extent that your head begins to reel and you begin to spend sleepless nights. This is the spirit in which

one leads a selfless life. Our youths have to imbibe this spirit. Vivekananda says, simply being able to feel is not enough. One can feel and sit quiet. The youths of this country have to be innovative. They are enterprising, intelligent. So feeling should be followed by planning. Swamiji says that you have to plan what you can do for these poor people. How can I bring succour to them? That should be the one concern. Again Swamiji says mere feeling and planning won't work. You have to put the plan into execution. When you begin to execute these ideas you will be facing insurmountable obstacles on the way. Swamiji asks: Do you have the guts to face these obstacles? If the whole world stands against you, sword in hand, will you have the strength to face it and do what you think is right? Can you do that? Then you are my men, Swamiji says.

This is how the youths of the country can become organized. Swami Vivekananda had made another very beautiful prediction. He had said—the future of India will entirely depend upon three things: organization, coordination of wills and accumulation of power. Swami Vivekananda wanted the youth force to be completely united, organized to work in an organized manner. The coordination of the wills becomes possible when their wills are directed toward one common aim. What should that aim be? That aim should be the good of the nation and nothing else. When eighty crore men and women have one single aim which is to build this nation, a great power will be accumulated. And this will transform India.

This is exactly what the Ramakrishna Mission is doing today. It is doing—*anna-dāna*, i.e. bringing food to the ill-fed. It is doing *prānadāna* by running hospitals. It is doing *vidyādāna* by running schools and

colleges. It is also doing *jnānadāna*, i.e. bringing wisdom to people. These are the four kinds of *dānas* prescribed in our *shāstras*. The Mission is doing this for the last one hundred twenty years and inspired by the Mission today there have come up many small institutions.

The mantra

Swamiji said in 1897 that for the next fifty years, the worship of Mother India should be the keynote of all our activities. Let all other gods and goddesses disappear from the mind for the time being. This should be the only God, for our race and our people. Once again we have to bring back this very mantra. We Indians have to be sensitive about it. How we handle this youth force will determine the destiny of India. So what is the mantra? The same mantra which Swami Vivekananda gave in 1897 has to be invoked once again to inspire the youth of this country. For the next three decades let this be the one agenda of everyone of us. The first agenda should be India, the second agenda should be India and the last agenda should be India for the youth of this country. Whenever I go to an educational institution I invariably tell the young people what Swami Vivekananda had once written to the Maharaja of Mysore and tell them to have these words embossed in their minds. What are the words? Swami Vivekananda says, life is short and the vanities of this world are transient. They alone live who live for others. The rest are more dead than alive. This was Swami Vivekananda's great gift to posterity, specially to the youth of India, inspiring them to dedicate their lives for the well-being of the nation first, and then they can go one step ahead and serve humanity, seeing Divinity in all. ■

* This is a slightly abridged version of the Swami Ranganathananda Memorial Lecture delivered at the Institute on 6 January, 2023 by Swami Shuddhidanandaji, President, Advaita Ashrama.