

Globalizing Indian Thought

SWAMI SARVASTHANANDA

Which thoughts?

It is privilege to be here to speak on a topic which was so dear to Swami Vivekananda. What are the thoughts that need to be globalized? Globalizing Indian thought is very good, but not everything Indian can be globalized. India stands for certain values—eternal spiritual values which Swami Vivekananda and before him many prophets, Buddha and many others, succeeded in globalizing. So, which are the thoughts that need to be globalized? And, that's a very pertinent point.

A few months ago, in the University College London, a very big event was held. Professor Debashish Chatterjee, who was one of the youngest directors of IIM Kozhikode and who was in IIM Kolkata and Lucknow before that, used to organize a global conclave on this particular theme every year. Most of the time he would invite our Hon'ble Prime Minister. The Prime Minister once suggested to him, why not hold this event outside India, because, if one really wanted to globalize Indian thought one should go to the heart of Western culture. So it was decided to hold it for the first time outside India—in London. The speakers were the global citizens: CEOs of big multinational corporations, eminent educationists, parliamentarians and so on. They were mostly Indians who had made their presence felt in a globalized world. I was, however, a bit amused and surprised when they shared their thoughts. Great Indians, they did India

proud as ambassadors in the scientific field or whichever field they excelled in. But I was a bit sad to see that, in talking about what India stands for, nobody touched upon our eternal spiritual values. I felt really sad and shocked beyond imagination when I heard them say that the two things that have made India popular all over the world were Bollywood and IPL. I said, my God! Is this what India stands for? These may be very popular in the world—this film industry, this cricket—and it is a craze no doubt, but that is not the kind of Indian thought that needs to be globalized. Because I was one of the speakers, I thought that I should tell them what Rabindranath Tagore had told Romain Rolland many years ago when the latter wanted to know something about India. Tagore said: If you want to know India, what Indian thought is, read Vivekananda. So he suggested that we see India through Swami Vivekananda's eyes, if we are to have a correct picture of what India stands for, what distinguishes India from other cultures, what is India's contribution to the world. That is why Swami Ranganathananda of hallowed memory used to insist that everyone should read the book titled *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. Because there we can know how India can be a 'Vishva Guru' in the real sense, not in the economic, sociopolitical sense, not a super power, militarily, or even an economic super power. We are achieving these goals but these are not the values which will make India the 'Vishva Guru'. India has to provide spiritual light as it has always done.

Swamiji gave this message in a place known as Maidenhead, Pinkneys Green where he stayed for a few days. Swami Saradanandaji, Swami Abhedanandaji, Henrietta Muller and some other American disciples were sipping tea together and suddenly Swamiji went into a trance. Mahendranath Dutta records this event in his Bengali book *Londoney Vivekananda*. The great prophet who represented Indian spiritual thought suddenly said something prophetic, when he was in that high spiritual state. Swamiji said: It has been so difficult in this life as compared to the previous life. They could not fully understand what Swamiji was saying. What was the previous life he was referring to and what was it that he wanted to do in this life? Then he said: But I shall not give up. I shall struggle and work hard till my last breath. This was a few years before he entered into *mahā samādhi*. He was determined to do something for the entire globe, to leave an impact on the entire world. He was in a hurry. That was why he criss-crossed London and America and Europe and he even told Sturdy—I have very little time with me. And this was the great mission he had set out to achieve—globalizing Indian spiritual thought. He meant to say that this was not the first time, as Buddha and others had done this before. Every time the world has faced military conquests, Indian spiritual thought has had its way; it spiritualized and saved civilizations. That was what he wanted to convey that afternoon.

Spirituality

Those were the thoughts which he expressed through *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, where he asked the youth, *beckoned them*, to spiritualize the entire world. India has survived for so many centuries and is surviving and will survive.

Nobody can destroy India if it does not give up its spirituality, its spiritual ways. So, basically, that was the warning he gave—if India gives up its spirituality, in three generations it will vanish from the face of the earth.

So, that was the real India that he wanted to globalize. In the past, globalization meant something else. When Swami Vivekananda was travelling with his Western disciples to Amarnath, he suddenly stopped and told his disciples that three big civilizations or three big thought-powers had shaped history and they were the Roman civilization, the Greek civilization and the Oriental civilization. And, he was saying, they have left a permanent impact on the entire world. He said, you have to give credit to the two other civilizations for developing one part of the global order. But India's role was different. For the Romans, globalization meant conquering all the nations and uniting them. That was one type of globalization—physically conquering through armies. Was that the kind of globalization Swamiji wanted? Definitely not. He said, those two other civilizations gave the world many things, administration, politics, etc. But, then, because of their cruelty, the Roman civilization perished. Greek civilization, we have to admit, gave the world art, sciences and technology. So we cannot deny the contribution of the Greeks. The world can be a much better place, provided the science and technology is used in a positive way. Then Swamiji said that Europe was sitting on top of a volcano. He spoke of materialism here. The world has witnessed two world wars. They showed how science and technology, when misused, created havoc. Swamiji said, only Indian spirituality could save Europe, sitting, as it did, on top of a volcano.

The global village

The world has become a global village. We cannot deny the blessings of science, technology, communication. When we speak of globalization, what we mean is that this interconnectedness has increased in the physical world, in the mental world. So many great contributions have been made by the Western civilization! Swamiji anticipated that. In fact he wanted India to get the benefit of these two great civilizations. But he said that our primary goal in this new globalized world order was spirituality.

That was why I said in that conclave that it was very good that they had the enthusiasm to come to London and would perhaps go to New York and try to globalize the world; but, first of all, we had to Indianize our Indian people. That is necessary. Most of the Indian born NRIs do not have a very clear picture of what India really stands for, what is its role in globalization, what is its role in the world. Then they have to look at India through the eyes of Swami Vivekananda. In *Vedanta Kesari*, for the last four years, four pages of every issue are devoted to discussions on *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* that are written in a very simplified manner for popular understanding. Now all these have been compiled in a new book titled, *Understanding India Through Swami Vivekananda's Eyes*—and this is going to be published soon.

There is no such thing as 'outside' now. Physical distances have been eliminated because of the Internet. Whatever you do becomes globalized within no time, thanks to information and communication technology. So far, so good. But what is required is to know what are the Indian thoughts that need to be globalized. That is important. Indians should equip themselves. You can find

Indians everywhere. In any country you go, you will find Indians there—highly skilled Indians. But have they tried to understand what India stands for? They are the ambassadors of India, wherever they go they will leave an impact. People will see India through the eyes of the people who go abroad and also those who live in India. So I told them, maybe, it is too early for you all to hold this conclave in a foreign country. First you try to understand Swamiji's thoughts, because he understood India—he was India-personified. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his Western disciples knew that he was India-personified. So if we want to know anything about India, as Tagore said, we have to understand it through Vivekananda's eyes. And then only we can speak with authority. We shall know about its glorious past, about its glorious future which he predicted and also the way we should conduct ourselves in our individual lives, in our family life, our social life and especially when we go abroad. So globalizing Indian thought is possible only if we internalize those Indian thoughts which have given us a unique identity.

Greek thought has left an indelible impression on the entire world—you can't change it. The Romans have left their impact, and the third civilization which has left its impact did it very silently like the silent dew, not with so much publicity but very silently. Swami Vivekananda himself started it and before him, Lord Buddha. As he said, I have a message for the West as Buddha had for the East. Of course, the impact of Buddha's message was felt more strongly in the far East, China and other countries. But he was, you may say, the first global spiritual leader whose message went outside the boundaries of his country. The Indian thoughts, the thoughts of the

Upanishads went out directly or indirectly to the German scholars. Our Oriental thoughts have found their way either through the Middle East or directly through Europe. They have impacted a lot of civilizations. So globalizing Indian thought is a very good idea, but we have to be equipped. As Swamiji said—first deluge India with spiritual ideas.

Attempts were underway, I was told, to Indianize the whole of management, at least in IIM Kozhikode. They have set a target. By 2047, there would be Indian ethos for modern management. Professor S.K. Chakraborty started it in IIM Kolkata. They want to do it on a global scale. Our Prime Minister wanted it to be done at many levels. Not just management, but other sciences also can be Indianized. But the point that they are missing is that we may allow others to excel in the secular field—we can even borrow from them—but when it comes to spirituality, that is where our uniqueness lies. That needs to be globalized more. If we understand this, if we understand Vivekananda properly, we shall see that he wanted these ideas to be globalized. Let the world come together through sciences, technologies, through other methods. They *are* coming together. Swamiji himself says, at the physical level each atom drags the entire universe behind it. Now the latest researches in quantum physics and other sciences are all pointing to the same fact, that even at the subatomic level we are one. That oneness is there. But true oneness is at the level of the spirit. And that is a discovery which India has made and that has to be emphasized. So many theories are coming up, they are trying to unify things, make things universal, but, the universal idea that is at a much more primary level is Consciousness. That is the greatest discovery, *Prajñānam Brahma*.

Grand unification

At Cambridge there is a scientist who got a Nobel Prize. He is 90 years old but still very active. Even at this age, he says, ‘Can I learn Sanskrit now, can I learn Pali so that I can learn many ideas of Consciousness in the original?’ Imagine the enthusiasm. He is Brian Josephson. He got the Nobel Prize in 1973, and he asks, ‘Can we have a platform where scientists, biologists and others may come together and share their idea of fundamental unity behind this universe as Vedanta says?’ Of course, he has not read Swami Vivekananda. So, I said, Swami Vivekananda spoke of it much earlier. See, science is uniting us, and everywhere unification is being attempted, but the basic unification which India discovered can be only at the level of Consciousness. So Consciousness is primary. Now there are so many wonderful scientists trying to find out what Consciousness is. They have to come to Indian spiritual thought. Only India can provide those wonderful ideas of grand unification at both spiritual and secular levels. And Swami Vivekananda had this in mind when he told those four women disciples who accompanied him that these three forces had to be put together in order to have a grand global civilization—the Greek excellence in science, art, technology, the Roman excellence in politics, administration and social experiments about how to rule society and, third, the Indian excellence in spirituality. In his lectures on Practical Vedanta, Swamiji answered those questions. India has the biggest, the greatest philosophy in the world, the Upanishads, but it has to be made practical, in our day-to-day life. That is why his whole attempt was to make these truths accessible to the laymen so that they can work it out in their day-to-day lives. He said, when these three civilizations, these three forces come together, we would have a truly

global civilization. Then the women disciples told him: Swamiji, that task is so difficult; who will bring these contradictory thoughts, the Western materialism, Indian spirituality together? Then he just made a small remark. I don't know what he meant by that. But he said that it had to be done by the women. Perhaps he meant that the mothers would communicate the ideas of these three civilizational streams to their children who would, in their turn, become in future the global citizens. Because, mothers are responsible for handing over civilizational values to their children. So he said it should be done by women, and there he stopped. He did not explain further.

What India can give to the world

We have the World Economic Forum, we have the United Nations and so many other bodies, but none of them are effective—because—the spiritual unity is missing. This has to be supplied by India. This was Swami Vivekananda's dream. He wanted the young to come to the fore. That was why Swami Ranganathanandaji, as an ambassador, travelled all around the world for so many years and said everywhere that the wonderful words of Swamiji, specially those enshrined in *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, and his letters, had to be studied by all of us. First know what India stands for, what are the eternal values that made India great, not only great but also enabled her to survive so many foreign invasions, onslaughts. For so many centuries we suffered poverty, economic crises. One of the richest countries till the sixteenth century, India was reduced to a poor nation—but still India survives. He says, India survives not because of what the Greek and the Roman civilizations had given. They were powerful once upon a time. He says, where is Rome now! What has

happened to the great Capitol Hill? All these places have almost vanished from the face of this earth; but India still survives. It survives because of its spirituality. And he says, the moment we give this spirituality up, we will vanish within three generations.

We have to be very careful in the matter of secular advancement. Indians living outside don't know what exactly India stands for. Pure spirituality is nowhere to be found. So many rituals are being revived. Nothing wrong in that. Most of the Indians who have settled abroad want some connection, some cultural, spiritual connection with their homeland. They think that in observing certain rituals they have Indianized themselves. Now Swamiji wanted us to spiritualize ourselves. Spirituality is the core of our religion. Other religions are also great, but that is because of the spiritual core within, not because of the external things that define their religions. All religions have a spiritual core. He says, keep it intact, try to imbibe those values, try to implement them in your own life and then you will see you can truly be global ambassadors and can really globalize Indian thought. From the conclave I realized, without Swami Vivekananda's ideas, without Indian spiritual thought, no attempt at globalization can come. I remembered the warning Swami Vivekananda gave. By imitation you will never become great, he told us. You have to strengthen yourself in the basic elements or values of your own culture which sustained you through the many centuries gone by, and will sustain you through future centuries. In every letter that he wrote to Alasinga he said, spiritualize India first. We think we are already spiritual. It is wrong. We have to learn to really imbibe spirituality. When you go to the West, you understand they are desperate to learn and everybody who goes there gives them something in the

name of spirituality which may be religious but may not be spiritual. So they are yearning for *that*. In fact, some Western disciples who come to our Vedanta Centre can see through this. They say, we don't come for all these, we want something fundamental. Can you give us that—tangible spirituality? It is a challenge because first we have to acquire it. You just can't give spirituality. You have to work hard. As Swamiji pointed out, through the four yogas we have to imbibe those values first within ourselves; then we can convey those ideas. We do not even have to speak; our *lives* will speak. Swami Turiyanandaji was sent to the West by Swamiji. Swamiji said to them, I will send you somebody who will live the life I spoke of. I gave you the ideas, but I am sending you somebody who will *live* Vedanta, and he will live amongst you.

The disciples of Thakur who went to the West—Swami Trigunatitanandaji, Swami Saradanandaji, Swami Abhedanandaji—they really globalized Indian thought because they just followed the path of Swami Vivekananda who was the pioneer. There is a wonderful book titled *The Pioneers of the Ramakrishna Movement in the West*. It is a nice book that tells you how they struggled in the initial stages. Swami Ghanananda, the founder Swamiji of London Centre in 1948 had just ten pounds in his pocket. He had been in Mauritius earlier. When he arrived in London, he did not know where to stay, where to eat. Just like Swamiji when he went to the West for the first time, they have struggled. These pioneers, just by the force of their spirituality, and, of course, by the grace of Holy Mother, Thakur and Swamiji, they built it brick by brick. Look at the wonderful history of how the Vedanta movement spread. For Swamiji this was easy because he was a prophet

who could just create an impact by his mere presence. But the swamis who went after him had to struggle a lot. Trigunatitanandaji went to the West. He gave up his life for Thakur's work. A crazy Western disciple threw a bomb at him, while he was standing at the pulpit.

Example, not mere precept

Turiyanandaji lived in the Shanti Ashram, meditating day and night. Swamiji said, you just go and live the life, you don't have to give lectures. The world wants to know what true spirituality is. And this is real globalization. It may take time. It may not be a movement which will spread very fast. When Prabhavanandaji and other swamis went to America and England, everyone of them took so much of time. Now, you see, things have become very easy. We have the media and other things. Things are spreading very fast, but we can't say quality is the same. Because listening to YouTube for wonderful talks is not going to help, one has to live up to the ideas. Then only it will create an impact. Swamiji and his brother disciples stayed, lived, and created a centre of spirituality, and so did their disciples. Swami Ghananandaji was the disciple of Mahapurush Maharaj. He had to struggle a lot, his health failed, he died of diabetes.

So, when you come to think of it, it is not an easy task to globalize Indian thought. First of all we have to internalize Indian thoughts, become aware of what are the essential thoughts, then try to translate them in our own lives. That is why Swamiji says, out of purity and silence comes the word of power. The power that Buddha had or the power that Christ had was born out of deep spiritual experience. Then only it can create a lasting impact. The ideas are very good but they should not remain frozen in our brains.

That was why Swamiji said that it was not enough to learn what India stood for, but that life had to be lived to create an impact. It maybe slow, but, as he says, we don't see the dew impacting, but the beautiful roses that you see in the morning are there because of the gentle dew which silently nourished them at night. So, he says, the impact of Indian thought is like that. It will not have an external appearance, like that of a military conquest; you won't see any external glory, for it is the glory of the spirit. Somebody once asked Swami Vivekananda, how do you know that civilization is progressing? Swamiji's definition is one of the most basic definitions of civilizational progress or global progress. He says, the more, Spirit dominates over Matter, the more the civilization flourishes. The more we read Spirit into Matter, the more does the civilization progress. Jesus read Spirit into Matter. That was why Rome gave way to the spiritual empire of Christianity within a few centuries. It was the spirit of Christ that conquered. They didn't have to fight the whole mighty Roman Empire. Twelve fishermen, Swamiji says, blew up the whole Roman Empire. They were not soldiers, they were just twelve disciples who through their spiritual lives conquered the whole of Rome and Rome got converted to Christianity.

The ideal

India needs to rally around Sri Ramakrishna's name if it has to grow, if it is to make any progress. We need a personality. Vedantic ideas are good. But is there a person who is a living example of Vedanta? He says, that's why I placed the ideals of Ramakrishna before you. The people of India should accept them. It is a

broad highway. There are many ways to reach God but this is the broad highway that Sri Ramakrishna made for us. Before you think of India's contribution to the world, before trying to globalize the world, you have to read Sri Ramakrishna's life, Holy Mother's life who literally lived a Vedantic life. Here was an excellent example of practical Vedantic life, of how the highest ideas of Vedanta could be lived. Swamiji, of course, expanded Sri Ramakrishna's ideas and took them to the entire world. So Indians have a duty, as Swamiji said, to preserve the spiritual culture for future civilizations. He says, India has to play its part. That is the greatest contribution she has to make.

I have been in the West for only seven years. I am still trying to figure out what exactly is our role there. It takes a lifetime to even figure it out. Our pioneers had to struggle so much and they passed on the baton to the future generations. If we are wise enough, if we learn from their wonderful efforts and experiences, we can perhaps contribute a little towards Swamiji's ideal of spreading Indian spiritual thoughts in foreign lands. *I can assure you, if there is a way, then it has to be the Vivekananda way.* There is no other way. We have to understand the essence of spirituality. Sri Ramakrishna's life and message give us that essence, show us what a true Muslim ought to be, what a true Hindu ought to be, what a true Christian ought to be. If we stick to the fundamentals that have been spelt out, lived in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, explained by Swamiji and also by Holy Mother, then only globalizing Indian thought will have some relevance and meaning. ■

* Swami Sarvasthananda, the Minister-in-Charge of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Buckinghamshire, U.K., delivered this lecture at the Institute on 16 December 2024.