

## How Relevant is Swami Vivekananda Today?

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A Western admirer once described Swami Vivekananda as being ‘young in years but eternal in wisdom’. If you accept this ecstatic statement at its face value, it establishes the relevance of Swami Vivekananda’s philosophy today. He had a brief life of less than 40 years; he passed away just as the last century was beginning. Two World Wars have taken place since then and there has been astounding progress in science and technology. As a result, the world as a whole has changed, so has man—in his outlook and style of living. India, the country which was ‘the queen of his heart’s adoration’ (in the words of Sister Nivedita) is now an independent country (just as he had predicted—the country would be free within the next 50 years in most unforeseen circumstances) and, like the world, India today faces problems unknown in his time. Can it still be said that Swami Vivekananda is relevant today?

### **Man-making—his mission**

Swami Vivekananda’s relevance depends not on the nature of the problems we face but on the spirit with which those problems have to be tackled. His stress was on man himself for, given the right kind of man, no problem need be daunting. ‘Man-making is my mission’, he used to say. Indeed, a country’s future depends upon its people—how good, intelligent and capable they are. Any country can produce one or two great men, but this is no guarantee that

that country will be great. That may prove the country’s potential, but unless the level of the average men and women in a given country is high that country cannot be said to be great. Swamiji used to say that one Buddha or Christ did not determine a country’s fate, it was the common people who decided what the country’s future would be like. According to him, the real power of the country lay with the masses. He described the neglect of the masses as a national sin. Most of her ills, he said, were due to this. The masses (‘a sleeping leviathan’, as he called them) possessed infinite power, but they were never given a chance to play their role in tackling national problems.

The masses remained mute spectators while the destiny of the nation was being decided by a handful of the so-called intelligentsia who knew nothing about the problems of common people and whose only claim to the authority they exercised was that they possessed university degrees. They in fact were more concerned about their own share in ruling the country and if they grumbled it was because they felt they did not enjoy the amount of power they deserved. What happened to the common people—their persecution by the upper castes, their ignorance, poverty—all these were of no concern to them. Yet they claimed to speak for the whole nation. They were spineless people who owed no allegiance to the country or its people, who had no courage to stand up to those who

insulted them or their country. In exasperation, Swami Vivekananda described them as ‘mummies’, who had ceased to exist, and yet continued to influence people as symbols of a glory they once possessed.

#### **Uplifting the masses**

Has the picture changed much even 40 years after India’s independence? It is the urban middle-class who still dominates. The masses hardly have much say in all that is going on in the country. They neither plan nor implement though the need for their involvement in nation-building processes is recognized. No wonder the country’s progress is tardy. In his vision of a new India, Swami Vivekananda wanted that the Shudras (this is the term he applied to the working people) should be on top. He said he was a socialist, adding at the same time, ‘not that socialism is perfect, but half a loaf is better than none.’ His understanding of history had convinced him that revolution was bound to come sooner or later. He mentioned two countries where it would come first—Russia and China. This was sometime in the nineties of the 19th century. How he had this hunch no one knows. Neither does one know if he would have approved of the way revolution took place in these two countries.

As for India, it is clear that he preferred evolution rather than revolution. Did he know the price a country paid when it went through a revolution? That he did not want a violent change in India is clear when he said that he wanted a process of ‘levelling-up’ and no ‘levelling-down’. That is to say, he wanted that the working people should have opportunities enough to catch up with the intelligentsia of the country. It is not that the intelligentsia have to go down to make room for the working people.

#### **Character-building through education**

The working people, who had long been neglected and had had no access to education, should now receive special attention so that they could quickly overcome their initial drawbacks. He wanted education to reach out to them rather than they come to education. He had rightly diagnosed that making education free was not enough. A further incentive was necessary: education should be available to them at their door-step, and not only should it be free, a working man’s child should have five teachers as against one provided for a child coming from an enlightened family. This is what he said to the ruler of Mysore when the latter was planning to introduce free education within his state. Swamiji laid great stress on education. He considered it the panacea of all the ills India was suffering from.

But what kind of education? Surely not merely book-learning, passing examinations, getting degrees and certificates! Education to him was not information but something more meaningful: it was man-making, life-giving and character-building; it was assimilation of ideas. It included also acquisition of skills so that it could be productive. He thought it a pity that the existing system of education did not enable a man to stand on his own feet, nor did it teach him self-respect and self-confidence. He wanted an education for India which would combine her idealism with Western efficiency. India had produced high thoughts but few of those thoughts had ever been put into practice. He attributed all her social evils to this lacuna. He pointed to the caste system as an example. Based on the principle of division of labour, it was an ideal institution. It was intended to give each individual a chance to grow as best he could

according to his genius, but when it became stratified and hereditary, it became most stultifying and therefore self-defeating. No one has condemned the caste practices in more scathing terms than Swami Vivekananda. But what is the remedy for this? Again, Swamiji would say, "Education". Given good education, those who are backward now would come into their own.

#### **Spiritual power to the rescue**

It was Swamiji's hope also that the upper classes would welcome any move that society might make for the progress of the backward classes. It was also his hope that they themselves would initiate the move and make any sacrifice necessary to help quicken their progress. This would be perfectly in keeping with what he described as being India's national ideals—renunciation and service. Should they fail to do this, it would be a bad day for them as well as for the country. History testifies that this warning was necessary. Wherever social change meets with resistance by vested interests, violence breaks out. This is why Swamiji wanted that, in India's case, at least this change, long overdue, should be smooth and peaceful. In India's long history, she has again and again been threatened by forces from within the country and outside; yet she has weathered the crisis each time by her flexibility. She has accepted change without giving up her basic spiritual character. This is how she has remained, by and large, the same country through the centuries. It is because of this capacity to assimilate new thoughts, to adjust to new pressures, to change according to new circumstances, that she has been able to avert a total disaster. Each time a crisis has engulfed her, she has emerged stronger, with a new look perhaps,

but basically the same in spirit. As Swamiji foresaw the rise of the working people, he also apprehended that this might be accompanied by a decline in cultural standards. Later evidence in countries where revolutions have occurred confirms that Swamiji was right. Lest this should happen in India, Swamiji wanted that, while the ground was being prepared for the awakening of the working people, adequate attention should be paid to educating the masses about India's spiritual traditions. He gave the call, 'Deluge the country with spiritual ideas.' What ideas in particular had he in mind? Obviously, the ideas which have influenced Indian culture most—truth, justice, love, peace, harmony and so on. These ideas have induced in the Indian mind a natural revulsion against violence. Swami Vivekananda's great concern was that the kind of social change he envisaged should cause no hurt to Indian traditions, rather it should uphold them. His first priority was the continuity of these traditions. In them lay India's strength. So long as India remained true to those traditions, she was safe. India should preserve those traditions not only for her own sake but also for the sake of the world. No country in the world had the distinction of possessing such traditions which she had nurtured and cherished over the centuries.

#### **Progress through science and technology**

The poverty of India troubled Vivekananda's mind. Touring rural India, he had seen the misery of the people. He had, at the same time, been struck by their noble character. He hated the British because they had drained the country's wealth in a systematic manner. He hated the so-called

upper-class Indians no less for their selfishness and callousness about the conditions of their own countrymen. In the final years of his life, he shunned their company as far as possible.

But how could the problem of poverty be solved? He thought the solution of the problem lay in science and technology. India must make wide use of Western science and technology to create an industrial revolution in the country. He had seen how the West had won its battle against poverty through science and technology. Nearer home, Japan also had done the same trick through science and technology. He wanted that in fighting poverty India should follow in the footsteps of the West, but in no other matter should she imitate it.

#### **The Indian way of life**

Vivekananda was impressed by the material prosperity of the West, but he had also observed how it had blunted its moral perceptions. He wanted that India should attain the same material prosperity yet retain her love for moral values. People in the West had a craze for sense-pleasure, which Swami Vivekananda did not like. He wanted to combine material prosperity with deep moral sensitivity. This has been the Indian way throughout her history.

Nothing Swami Vivekananda preached is outdated. He preached modern thoughts, but he was a far-seeing man to whom the immediate alone was not important, so was what was to follow in the distant future. He was interested in everything concerning man—not only religion, but also science, art, literature, history, politics, in short, everything. His views on some of these subjects were also radical. For instance, he wanted India to have a classless and

casteless society. He said that she should have an Islamic body with Vedantic brains. He was an admirer of Islam to the extent that it did not encourage any class or caste distinctions. But, according to him, the ideal society was not only casteless and classless, but one which aimed at the kind of spiritual development which the Vedanta envisaged. That is why he advocated a society which had an Islamic character but also a thrust towards the maximum spiritual growth.

India's present problems are many: poverty, illiteracy, casteism, lack of cohesion. But these are not new problems. They existed even in Swamiji's time. He gave much thought to them and expressed views about their solution which are as valid as ever. He was not for ready-made solutions, but for solutions determined with due regard to history and circumstances. He was not for imitating other countries either. Each country had to tackle its problem in its own way, according to its genius. His emphasis was on the will, the right approach and character of the people. The present problems may be solved, but there will soon be other problems. Life without problems is inconceivable. But given these qualities, no problems need prove intractable.

#### **Vivekananda's vision**

Swami Vivekananda had made three predictions, two of which have come true. The first and most important of these was about India's freedom. Way back in the nineties of the 19th century he had said, 'India would be free within the next fifty years in unforeseen circumstances.' This has happened. When he said this, few heard it, and no one, at any rate, attached any importance to it. It seemed least likely that this would happen. People, at large, were

happy to be ruled by the British. To them British rule meant the rule of law, the rule of equality and justice. There was hardly any political consciousness as such among the people. The concept of political freedom was unknown to them. Even the intelligentsia were not sure what they wanted. A handful of them wanted better jobs and the role of a junior partner in the administration of the country, if possible. The thought of an independent India never crossed their minds. Some of them even thought British rule was a blessing. They wanted it to continue for the sake of the country's peace and progress. It is against this backdrop that Swami Vivekananda had made the prediction that the country would be free within the next fifty years.

His other more significant, prediction was that the first Proletariat Revolution would take place in Russia, which no one thought would or could happen. Marx, the protagonist of the proletariat revolution had said that it would happen where the trade union movement was pretty strong. On this token, he predicted it would happen in Germany. Yet, contrary to Marx's prognosis, the first Proletariat Revolution took place in Russia, basically an agriculturist country, without any organized labour movement. How did it happen? How did Swami Vivekananda make these correct predictions? It is difficult to say. It is known that he had been a good student of history and, as such, his perception of historical forces was also deep and sound.

Vivekananda made yet another prediction which one is waiting to see come true—that India would some day rise to great heights of prosperity and power, far more than she had done in the past. The present picture of India gives no hint of such

a possibility. Far from such an augury, today she is beleaguered by problems which some think may very well spell her doom. Some of these problems are of course old, almost eternal—poverty, illiteracy and caste—in existence before Independence, and as strong and pernicious as ever. But somehow or the other India has learnt to live with them and they need not worry her too much. The new problems that are really ominous are separatism of ethnic groups and religious fundamentalism. The country has already suffered a major partition on religious grounds and the question that is bothering everybody is, if more partitions follow what now remains of India will cease to exist.

#### **Live and let live**

Swamiji obviously had a hunch that this would be the situation if India followed Western methods in her politics, which he warned India against imitating. The West is by nature exclusive and, therefore, intolerant. India, on the other hand, always welcomed new ethnic groups and with them, new thoughts and ways of life, absorbing them and making them her own. Where are the Greeks, the Scythians, the Mongols and the Huns today? They have all merged into the Indian identity. India today is a fine mosaic of many races, cultures and traditions—all knit together by cords of mutual love and goodwill. She has always been multi-racial and multi-religious.

There have been people who are highly developed in the midst of people who are comparatively backward. Yet they have always lived together in peace and amity, with hardly any clashes embittering their relations. Most of them have been fully assimilated, but, if some have preferred to stay separate, they have stayed so. 'Live and

let live' has been India's policy. She has always been a believer in the philosophy of 'unity in diversity'. God is one, so is man. She has never tried to interfere with the freedom of any group. This is why there are so many sects even within a single religious community. Swamiji welcomed the multiplicity of sects. He knew growth was possible where there was freedom. If there was free growth, diversity was inevitable. Diversity is natural, uniformity is artificial. Each must grow in his own way, otherwise he cannot grow at all. India has always believed in this principle and has lived up to it too. But where is unity then? The unity is in the respect that each has for the other and the commonalty of ideals. According to Swamiji, India's national ideals are renunciation and service. That is to say, each group renounces for the other and thus serves the nation. This is the way diversity has helped strengthen Indian unity. This is the way integration is possible in any multiracial society. One only hopes India would stay true to these national ideals and not be infatuated by the lust for power which is the peculiar feature of Western politics. In India, the aim of politics should be to serve, not to rule.

#### **Working classes measuring up to intelligentsia**

Swamiji knew that the day was not far when a new India would emerge, where power would rest not with the intelligentsia (the Brahmins), but with the working people (the Shudras). The sooner this happened, the better for the country. He also hoped that the intelligentsia would welcome this change for their own sake and for the sake of the country. Elsewhere this change has been accompanied by violence. In India's case, no

violence is needed, only if the intelligentsia act in conformity with the national ideals. Indian society has always shown a remarkable degree of flexibility and adjusted itself to suit the needs of the hour.

If not fully, partially at least, Swamiji's prediction has come true. The working people today are far more powerful than ever before. They are better off and slowly catching up with the intelligentsia. It was not, however, Swamiji's intention that the intellectual and moral level of the country should go down in the process of this kind of social change. This is why he wanted that children of the working people be given more opportunities for education than even those of the intelligentsia. Above all, he wanted India to remain culturally and morally as strong as ever. He believed in 'levelling-up' and not 'levelling-down'. This exactly is what is happening in independent India—a happy sign.

#### **An Islamic body with Vedantic brains**

Swamiji's vision was of the working people coming to power and their cultural and moral level going up, with India as a society which would be classless and casteless. His favourite description of that society was that it would be 'an Islamic body with Vedantic brains'. The ideal society should also be one which would constantly strive for a higher level of moral perfection (which he called 'Vedantic').

The first priority in the programme of work he had outlined for his country was to eradicate poverty. He knew what India needed was an industrial revolution. For this what was necessary was to spread the study of science and technology throughout the country. India had at one time been far ahead of other countries in science and

technology, but for centuries she had stagnated and fallen behind other countries in every aspect. The poverty of the people was killing them, physically and spiritually. On top of everything, an inertia had set in, which made people accept the situation as inevitable. This is what hurt him most. The British took advantage of the situation and exploited the people with shameless brutality. He advised Jamshedji Tata to set up an Institute where advanced research could be made. They were travelling on board the same ship, Tata for Japan and he for the USA. Tata was trying to import industrial products from Japan. Swamiji did not like the idea. He wanted Tata, not only to act as a pioneer in industrializing India, but also have a research centre so that a continuous flow of know-how might keep up the tempo of industrial expansion. Tata followed Swamiji's advice. He did set up an Institute of Research which is well known throughout the world. Interestingly enough, he invited Swami Vivekananda to be its first director. What reply Swamiji gave is not however known.

#### **Science-religion nexus**

Vivekananda knew that the strength of a nation lay not in its size or wealth, but in its character. It was his hope that India would set an example of how science and religion could meet, science taking care of man's physical needs and religion of his moral and spiritual needs. A rich man is not necessarily a moral man. 'Man-making is my mission.' He realized that no society could survive unless its human element was good and strong. He was impressed by the West's dynamism, power of organization, and its

achievements in science and technology. But he also noticed its preoccupation with sense-pleasure and indifference to moral development. He knew there could be no peace for the individual and no progress for society as a whole unless there was a happy balance between material prosperity and moral advancement.

As the years go by, India is slowly winning its battle against poverty. On the food front, her achievement is remarkable. Immediately after Independence she had to depend largely upon imports to give her people a square meal a day. Today she is on her way to achieving self-sufficiency in food production. India has gone through a green revolution. She often witnesses floods as well as droughts. Yet she is able to feed her people without any aid from outside. Her progress in science and technology has also been remarkable. Today she ranks among the most technologically advanced countries in the world. In engineering technology she is self-sufficient and is even able to help many developing countries.

But, alas, there are still pockets of poverty in the country. Also social injustice is not completely eliminated and illiteracy is still a problem. How can Swami Vivekananda's views of India become a reality so long as these problems remain unsolved? He was an impatient man. He knew what India needed was courage and self-confidence. The problems are India's, and India has to find the solutions herself. She was not for copying others, far less depending upon them. She must, by her own efforts, solve her problems, the current ones as well as those that may come in her way in the future. ■

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