

Swami Vivekananda—the ‘Warrior Monk’ in the Ochre Robe

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This paper tries to contemplate Swami Vivekananda in two apparently diverse roles. The diversity lies in the distinctive paths of a ‘warrior’ and a ‘monk’. But, whether a warrior or a monk, one has to follow organizational rules and regulations as well as rigours of disciplinary practices. Such practices again widely differ. Yet there are similarities between the two. Both leave their home, their kith and kin and embrace ‘homelessness’. Vivekananda was a *sannyāsi*, a socio-religious leader in today’s interpretation, deviating to a great extent from the traditional modes of Indian monasticism. At the same time, he had the attributes of a true warrior. One finds that in the ochre robe of an Indian *sannyāsi*, he verily represents a warrior who, caring the least for his own salvation, always fights for the cause of his motherland. Before I proceed further, let me gratefully acknowledge the debt I owe to Marie Louise Burke for using her phrase ‘warrior monk’¹. She makes ‘Return of the Warrior’ the title of the eighth chapter in her vastly researched book on Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda was not an ordinary warrior engaged in a warfront. As Romain Rolland says, ‘He was energy personified, and action was his message to men... [his] forehead was weather-beaten like a crag by the four winds of the spirit... His super-powerful body and too vast brain were the

predestined battlefield for all the shocks of his storm-tossed soul.’² It means he perceived the deep pathos of the suffering men and women in general and, hence, could never remain calm. Despite his ‘storm-tossed soul’, Vivekananda argues that it is ‘the calm, forgiving, equable, well-balanced mind that does the greatest amount of work.’³ Here he categorically demolishes the excuses of the slothful and upholds the ideal of true masculinity through an orderly, restrained life. At the same time, like a fighting warrior, who looks for freedom, this ‘warrior monk’ saw ‘liberty’ as the ‘sole condition of spiritual progress’. In one of his lectures on ‘Maya and Freedom’, he uttered, ‘And so all are marching towards freedom. We are all journeying towards freedom’⁴. A monk and a warrior, fellow-travellers in this vast battlefield of life, are here rolled into one.

The monk-cum-warrior of my subject is always in favour of the absolute freedom that a man deserves, for, it is through man that Truth reveals itself. A careful reading of his projects and thoughts shows cohabitation of ideas and objectives, like those of character-building, fearlessness, progressive nationalism, religion, spirituality, politics, material achievement and the like. There is coherence in his clairvoyant vision of future India. While he draws a sharp binary between the ‘material’ West and the ‘spiritual’ East, he is never willing to deny

the value of materialistic advancement for the sake of spirituality. By spirituality he meant the spirit of man that should manifest itself in all its inner glory. The human aspiration, he believed, has to embrace the delight of existence that comes only after an all-round development. To put simply, he wanted physical, psychical and moral growth in men. While elaborating 'the degree of manifestations', he saw no difference between the 'Buddha' as an 'evolved amoeba' and the 'amoeba' as an 'involved Buddha'. His idea was to make the latent manifest in every sphere of life. It was this warrior, this *sannyāsi*, who reminded the colonial subjects of the country that they were not cabin-dwellers, born to a life cramped and confined; they were rather meant to explore, to seek and to push the limits of their potential as human beings. Like Nietzsche's visualization of *Übermensch* as the goal of human striving, he also asserted that every man has within himself the power to cast off his chains. This way he made us feel that we are able to rise above the worldly limitations and are meant to be as much at home in the realm of spirituality as in the world of physical reality. So, he tried utmost to spread the Buddha-idea among the masses to rise above all narrow feelings. Here lies the beauty of the 'Double Soul', if a slightly modified usage of Sri Aurobindo's phrase is permissible here⁵. He thus nourished the idea of India's resurgence and saw its 'only hope' in the synthesis of 'Vedanta brain and Islam body'⁶. In this synthetic approach lies Vivekananda's catholicity in attempting to bring out the best in everybody for morally elevating the whole humanity.

Sometimes, it becomes difficult to identify Swami Vivekananda as a typical missionary monk although he had a definite mission during his Western campaign. His

'mission' was specifically export-oriented, to export values of ancient Indian religion as well as Sri Ramakrishna's views to the West, while his 'project' was import-oriented, to import monetary help for his hungry countrymen and to end their sufferings. This is clear in his letter of 20 August 1893, written to Alasinga Perumal, where he writes, 'With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help.'⁷ The need of this 'help' he felt from his core and it was the main impetus behind his peripatetic oratory abroad. Elsewhere his similar perception is expressed as: 'I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven. ...India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of priestcraft is to be removed. ...More bread, more opportunity for everybody!'⁸ It, indeed, sounds like a statesman's or a politician's voice, not of a conventional monk. His sole 'motto' lay in 'Elevation of masses without injuring their religion'⁹. Regeneration of Indian people through proper education was always his prime objective. He is thus found to excitedly ask his Madras disciples: 'Can you make a European society with India's religion? ...Have fire and spread all over. Work, work.'¹⁰ Does it not contradict the familiar idea of an ascetic and bring forth a promising fighter, a warrior, instead? A focused 'warrior monk' was his real self, I assume. His gospel lay in fearlessness. Only in fear does a man need a saviour. Vivekananda apparently followed another nineteenth century model of a human being—*Homo faber* or 'Man the maker'. In one of his letters to Sister Nivedita, he writes: 'I am the Ruler of destiny, the Wiper-out of fact.'¹¹

But what made him embrace a man-making mission? It was inherent in his tenet.

If we recall Romain Rolland’s depiction of Vivekananda in the ‘prelude’ section of his book, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, we assuredly discover a beautifully simple, poetic, yet a kingly, heroically virtuous and harmonious self of Vivekananda. The description reminds one of the Roman word *Virtu*, suggesting strong courage and manliness. The word *Virtu* includes in its meaning all that is excellent in the physical, intellectual and moral constitution of man. Without ‘manliness’, an attribute without any gender specificity, there can be no heroism, no greatness of heart. The *sannyāsi* knew this well and, so he was ever after kindling the dying spirit of the ‘awful mass of conservative jelly-fish’. His innate manliness helped him rejoice with those who rejoiced and weep with those that wept. This rare quality, his *openness* to God’s Light and Love is the first element of his manliness. The second one, of course, was his cheerful *decisiveness* that enabled him to go out and perform the right task in right time. These two elements, sheathed in his indomitable will power, combined to develop the idea of ‘Real Man’.

The idea was developed by the ‘social lion’¹², who often roared at the people who lost their individuality and thought themselves the weakest. His only focus was to kindle the latent fire of all-round awareness in ‘the sleeping Leviathan’. He realized that India’s downfall was utterly due to loss of ‘manliness’. In his ‘Plan of Campaign’ he repeats his demand: ‘...strong, vigorous, believing young men, sincere to the backbone, are wanted. A hundred such and the world becomes revolutionised. The will is stronger than anything else.’¹³ This was why he often recited from the *Mundaka Upanishad: Nāyamātmā balahinena labhyo* (‘One could not realize one’s soul without strength’). He really wanted a physically

strong race. With a profound feeling he thus said: ‘Be strong, my young friends; that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita. ...You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. ...You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men.’¹⁴ His thrust was always on the strong will-force that distinguishes a warrior, or a monk, for that matter, from the common mass. We really cannot forget his ‘watchword’: ‘struggle, struggle up to light! Onward!’¹⁵ Such intrepid and masculine utterances are primarily expected from a patriotic soldier, and hardly from a traditional monk. His another ‘watchword’ was of course ‘Freedom’. The love of freedom was so pronounced in him that he said, ‘I would rather be doing evil freely than be doing good under bondage.’¹⁶ In fact, Vivekananda as ‘Warrior Monk’ was the first to inculcate in us the heady mixture of proud patriotism, an emancipatory zeal and a host of manly virtues. This mixture worked tremendously among the early twentieth century freedom fighters. Let me cite a little from a statement made by the indefatigable fighter, Sri Hemchandra Ghose, before Dr Bhupendranath Datta on 18 May, 1954. ‘He [Vivekananda] stressed on cadre-building for a noble cause. He was not happy with the ways of the then Indian National Congress. ...Swamiji then exhorted us with a passion divine to take up the work of service to the poor and the down-trodden, ...The patriot-saint blessed me ... and said, ... “India should be freed politically first.” ... Swami Vivekananda appeared to us to be more a political prophet than a religious teacher.’¹⁷ The ‘Monk’, no doubt, had renunciation as the driving force behind all his selfless work. Sister Nivedita too saw ‘renunciation’ and

‘conquest’ as the ‘two ways in which freedom of any kind can be manifested.’¹⁸ The spirit of renunciation, that marks a monk as well as a warrior, motivated both the master and the disciple.

An interesting question could be raised here to examine the paradigm shift from a monk to a warrior or the vice versa. The man who says with the deep calmness of an Indian monk, ‘I am only existence and knowledge’¹⁹, is found to utter another thought-provoking idea elsewhere: ‘The man who really takes the burden blesses the world and goes his own way.’²⁰ In both, one discovers an all-embracing yet solitary, dispassionate self, the attribute that matches well with a dedicated warrior’s as well as a devout monk’s tenet. The term ‘*vir-sannyāsi*’ conflates the two selves. But what made his ‘warrior’ self visible on different occasions? By quoting Vivekananda as saying ‘The more I have been opposed, the more my energy has always found expression’, Marie Louise Burke in her book writes: ‘Falsehood and hypocrisy always aroused the warrior in Swamiji.’²¹ Vivekananda’s biography clearly supports Burke’s statement. In Malvina Hoffman’s words: ‘There was a sense of tranquility and power about him [Vivekananda].’²² The most remarkable aspect of this ‘Double Soul’ is found in Vivekananda’s ever-assertiveness and his ability to lift people up to a higher level, beyond man-made creeds and denominational status. His exceptional expertise to electrify a large audience without raising his voice while making them spellbound doubtlessly indicates his astonishing power of insight into every person and every subject. This ochre-robed Indian *sannyāsi* seemed to personify the elevated ‘aloofness’ and a gentle attitude of simplicity towards his fellow-men. Let me quote two lines from the poem *Bidrohi* by

Kazi Nazrul Islam, which so eminently suit Swami Vivekananda: ‘*āmi sannyāsi sura-sainik, / āmi yuvarāj, mama rājvesh mlān gairik*’. (I am a monk, a divine warrior / I am a prince in ochre robe.)

Both the warrior and the monk are workers; both of them work in their respective fields. One of them is usually engaged in incessant ‘life-struggle’, the other, however, loves a ‘calm, retiring renunciation’. But one cannot find a better picture of a warrior-monk than that provided by Vivekananda himself in *Karma Yoga*. Here he brings the idea of ‘ideal man’, who, ‘in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert.’²³ His objective was to combine ‘real activity’ with ‘eternal calmness’ to achieve ‘the goal of Vedanta.’²⁴ This set of mind reflects a deep composure and a deeper adaptability of a true warrior and a true monk. Vivekananda had in him such a rare blend of the two selves. He emphatically said, ‘All this manifoldness is the manifestation of that One.’²⁵ He asserted, ‘Man is like an infinite spring, coiled up in a small box, and that spring is trying to unfold itself.’²⁶ When a man realizes the potency of self-unfolding within and perceives the power uncoiling itself, he is about to reach the height of Vivekananda’s ‘ideal man’.

Vivekananda was a monk, who says like the Buddha: ‘Do good if you can, but do not injure the world.’²⁷ This monk, in a letter written from Paris, expresses his sense of withdrawal from all sorts of duty and responsibility by saying, ‘I am free, the begging-monk as before.’²⁸ But again he was a warrior, who fought against all odds. More than a common warrior, he writes in one of his letters, ‘I am Fear of fear, the Terror of terror’²⁹ ‘*āmi mahābhoy, āmi abhishāp*

prithvir’, to quote the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam once again. He roars, ‘We want to be outlaws. If you are bound by laws, you will be a lump of clay.’³⁰ He roars like a captain of a fighting army and signals his followers to go ahead by breaking the walls of dependence and bondage. In the lecture delivered at Madras in 1897, he reminds the audience ‘... through centuries of slavery, we have become like a nation of women.’³¹ He rouses the ‘jellyfish’ Indians with the words: ‘So give up being a slave. For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds.’³² This was a remarkable fore-sighted statement from the lips of the ‘Patriot-Prophet’. He did never support either servile attitude or effeminacy. A manly Vivekananda’s pep-talk was ‘Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached.’ It asserts a leader’s determined stand in any sphere of life and erases the subtle line of division between a warrior and a monk: ‘Let people praise you or blame you, let fortune smile or frown upon you, let your body fall today or after a Yuga, see that you do not deviate from the path of Truth.’³³ This firmness was what he wanted to instil in everyone. Another experiential truth is shared by this warrior-cum-monk: ‘The power of suffering is infinitely greater than the power of doing.’³⁴ It is a fact that both a warrior and a monk have to gather this experience. There is another commonality between the two. Both of them are seekers of something new, something fresh. To quote Sister Nivedita: ‘Swamiji did not live on his memory of Sri Ramakrishna. He made his life new and learnt new things every day.’³⁵

Vivekananda’s life-long quest was ‘Man-making’ and his ‘mission’ was the regeneration of the Motherland. In this

process he went on inspiring people and making leaders. His sole endeavour reflects transformation of values into actions and translation of vision into reality. It became possible because the ‘vast and silent part’ of his mind maintained a poise to ‘illumine his surface mind’³⁶. Whether he is seen as a ‘warrior’ or a ‘monk’, he was, after all, ‘simple and truthful as a child’, to quote from Mrs Bagley’s letter of 22 June, 1894.³⁷ In his famous statement, ‘I have a message for the West as Buddha had a message to the East’³⁸, Vivekananda appears as a monk as well as a soldier of a very high order. His life was his ‘message’. His life stood behind his words. It was ‘a truth’ that he wanted ‘to teach’³⁹ to the people of the world. Of his ‘world mission’ he became keenly aware between the last part of 1894 and the first part of 1895⁴⁰. While in Detroit, in 1894, ‘Swamiji’s power was rising to a peak’⁴¹ resulting in his being recognized as ‘the cyclonic Hindu’⁴² through one of the papers there, although Vivekananda himself took this as ‘the funniest thing’⁴³ about him. Whether ‘cyclonic’ or not, he was, in brief, ‘a completely illumined soul whose heart cried over the suffering of all men’⁴⁴. In an 1894 letter he sends a blow to the conventionalists by saying: ‘If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God—every being that wears a human form—God in His universal as well as individual aspect.’⁴⁵

In the concluding part, let us recall that Vivekananda’s central philosophy was majorly built on Upanishadic monism and the ascetic principle of renunciation. Yet he is seen to ungrudgingly praise the positive achievements of Western civilization. It depicts his unconventional monastic attitude. There is another picture that we see in his *parivrajaka* days. As he got the opportunity

to know the Indian masses and their sufferings intimately during this phase, he set other goals of a wandering-monk aside and let his warrior-self gradually awake within to eradicate the evils from society. What he wanted was a thorough reconstruction of society. In Dr Bhupendranath Datta's writings, we find Vivekananda being regarded as one of the direct sponsors of militant

nationalism. Dr Datta writes, '...all the militant nationalist movements ...were launched as a result of Swamiji's thunderous roar, "Arise. Awake"'⁴⁶. Vivekananda's clarion-call 'Be bold and face / The Truth! Be one with it!' in his poem *To The Awakened India* removes fear and nervousness at an instant. The passions of a warrior here mingle with the devotion of a *sannyāsi*. ■

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