

Our Cultural Heritage : Its Modern Orientation—II

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The East meets the West

Last evening, we discussed the nature of the Indian cultural heritage and, towards the end I said, as we come to the modern period, we find a sagging of spirits and all sorts of weaknesses coming in. And one particular point I had made in that lecture was that our political heritage has been broken several times, but our spiritual heritage has remained strong, steady and unbroken.

Anyone studying Indian history can see that the spiritual continuity of India has been unbroken, while political continuity has been broken again and again. The importance of the modern period is to strengthen our political status, as well as the nation, and to give us a strong, steady body politic. When we come to the modern period, we witness a contact with the dynamic culture of the West. We entered the modern period in the 18th century. The West had developed remarkably in the last three centuries, not only in science and technology but also in political thought. India came in touch with this powerful culture of the West. It was of course a new experience. Ages ago, we had come in touch with the Greek culture. That was also a Western culture, but it was just confined to the fringes of India. But this time India came under the political and cultural domination of the West through Britain. As Britain introduced the English

language, we took it up. This interaction between the two cultures—one, ancient but weak and the other, fresh and strong—is an interesting study in the history of the 19th century India. In this history we find the British organizing the whole country politically and creating what you find today, the political unity of India. We had lost that unity, with the small states fighting against each other. We have to thank the British that they unified the whole of India politically and gave us the English language to get some of the most important Western cultural values and thoughts.

India's contact with the West had varied consequences. In the early stages it was frightening to us. We thought that because of this contact we might lose our culture. Therefore the first reaction to this Western culture was defensive. Raja Rammohun Roy, one of the outstanding personalities of the early modern period, was a versatile genius. He was the person who asked us to become modern, to base ourselves on our own Vedantic heritage, but also take the positive ideas from the West. His attitude was that we could establish relationship with the West on an equal basis. But as he came too early, we could not talk of 'equal basis' at that time. The West was dominant, it was ruling over India. How could there be an equality between the slaves and their master? But towards the end of the century, the same idea was expressed by Swami

Vivekananda. Romain Rolland described Sri Ramakrishna as the consummation of the two thousand years of spiritual life of three hundred million people. The whole life of India, specially its spiritual aspect, was re-lived in Sri Ramakrishna's life, while in Vivekananda we found a dynamic personality and a spirit of acceptance of the modern West. We had accepted many values from other cultures throughout our long history and in this modern period, Vivekananda stood for an attitude of acceptance.

Swami Vivekananda's stand was that our culture was not absolutely perfect. No culture, for that matter, is perfect. Whatever was weak in our culture could be strengthened by incorporating what was strong in the Western culture. Swamiji found these cultures to be complementary and not contradictory. By taking in what we lacked, we might make India modern and progressive. This kind of approach we find in Vivekananda literature.

The Western thinkers of the time, however, thought that India would die at the touch of the foreign culture. During the early British period this idea was doing the rounds, that India would die in no time. But the opposite happened. This contact with the West roused the dormant spirit of India. Tremendous energies that had been there in the heart of India exploded in the form of a tremendous awakening, resulting in the Indian Renaissance of the 19th century. India became young, vital once again. It was indeed a remarkable phenomenon; an ancient nation and an ancient culture emerged as young, vital and full of energy.

One of the great thinkers of the modern period was Brajendranath Seal. He was a college-mate of Swami Vivekananda. He was a brilliant intellectual, who was the first to write a book on India's contribution to

Physical Sciences. The book is called *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus*. There he used a beautiful expression to describe India. He said, India is ageing, but never getting old; it is getting fresh, getting youthful. This is amazing, because many old cultures have perished when they came in touch with a powerful foreign culture. But that did not happen in the case of India. Why? Because there is a tremendous strength in Indian culture and that strength found expression in a galaxy of great personalities who appeared in the modern period. They assimilated Western culture and English language and then they made India stronger by joining the strength of the West with the strength of India. This was the story of the 19th century.

In the 19th century we had many social problems, many national weaknesses. But this action-reaction process gave birth to a number of social reform movements. Naturally, various changes followed. In fact, the whole of the modern period can be characterized as a period of revolutionary changes. It was in Swami Vivekananda that this modern Renaissance achieved its maturity. He, while accepting the great elements of the Western culture, threw a challenge to the West. The West needed, he asserted, certain profound ideas of Indian culture and there should be some give and take, on an equal basis. The first Indian Prime Minister, Nehru, refers to Vivekananda in a beautiful passage in his book, *The Discovery of India*. He said: 'Rooted in the past and full of pride in India's heritage, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life's problems and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present.' That is a beautiful tribute to Swamiji's personality. Men like Romain Rolland and Tagore admitted unequivocally that Swamiji represented the

perfect synthesis of the East and the West. Forces that had been cancelling each other out in every culture found a perfect harmony in Vivekananda. Reason and faith, religion and science, the ancient and the modern, the East and the West—all found harmony in this remarkable personality.

At the age of twenty-nine, Swami Vivekananda appeared at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and literally conquered the mind and heart of that powerful country. This conquest was in continuation of the kind in which India has been engaged from the very ancient times. It was Ashoka who gave expression to this novel idea of India's expansion. Other countries expand through military means—by following the policies of imperialism or colonialism. But India's expansion is different. Ashoka said he would silence the war drums and instead sound the kettledrums of peace and harmony. That idea had been mentioned by Ashoka in his edicts, and Vivekananda reiterated it in the modern language.

In a beautiful lecture ('The Work Before Us') Swami Vivekananda says, 'Like the gentle dew that falls unseen and unheard, and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses, has been the contribution of India to the thought of the world. Silent, unperceived, yet omnipotent in its effect, it has revolutionised the thought of the world, yet nobody knows when it did so.' (*CW*, III, p. 274) History records only wars and conflicts. Silent influences are not recorded there. India's impact on the world has been like this even in the modern period. We were a slave nation when Swamiji had gone to America. Yet he was able to impress upon the Western world the wisdom of India, its high philosophy and spirituality and tremendous message it has for all humanity. In so doing, he initiated the wonderful

exchange of ideas between the East and the West. In the future ages it will be understood that the world history and Indian history became intertwined through Swami Vivekananda. He evinced the spirit of acceptance. Tagore particularly recognized this aspect of Vivekananda's contribution. He told Romain Rolland who was then writing a book on Mahatma Gandhi that if he wanted to understand India, he must study Vivekananda, because in him everything was positive and nothing negative. That was a tremendous statement. It led Rolland to present Ramakrishna-Vivekananda in his two wonderful books—*The Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, and *The Life of Vivekananda*—as the splendid symphony of the universal soul. That was the consummation of the Renaissance movement that started at the beginning of the 19th century.

Swamiji inspired India to become modern, to develop scientific attitudes to get rid of the evils of untouchability, caste exclusiveness, and to uplift women. All these things we neglected during the last thousand years when our body politic was weak. Swamiji has told us how we can make India modern and raise the common people from the state of neglect in which they have been languishing for centuries. In the Vivekananda literature you find this wonderful message about the dignity of man. In one of the letters from America he wrote to his disciple Alasinga, 'They [the so-called great and high in society] little dream of the ages of tyranny, mental, moral, and physical, that has reduced the image of God to a mere beast of burden; the emblem of the Divine Mother, to a slave to bear children; and life itself, a curse.' (*CW*, V, p. 16) That was the Indian society in the 19th century by when the

nation had lost its strength, its vigour. Even the great spiritual teachings of the sages were watered down into petty, little village superstitions!

True religion

I often compare the idea of religion in India now with that which existed in the last century. Even today, many people think that religion is performing some rituals, and observing some ceremonies. There is no stress on the spiritual growth of man, on the development of high character. This is the nature of our understanding because, we lost the energy of the mind during the last few centuries. A jaded mind cannot understand the mighty philosophy which you find in Vedanta, in the *Gītā*, etc. Vivekananda said, can a mosquito understand the strength of a lion? Only an elephant does. Even today I find, even a scholar will go to Rishikesh, pay five rupees to a priest to catch hold of the tail of a cow to go to heaven! So many scholars will do that even today! Where are the great teachings of Vedanta? Where are the great teachings of Buddha? Therefore Swamiji came to rouse the understanding of the true spirit of religion which is character-strengthening. He calls it 'man-making religion', 'man-making education'. He aroused the nation to this understanding of the great spiritual heritage of India—that is rational, universal and practical, that unifies humanity, not only in India but in the rest of the world as well. We had been sleeping for ages; he made us wake up from that sleep.

Coming from America and Europe after his work there, he landed first in Colombo, then Anuradhapuram, then Jaffna, and finally on the Indian soil. He delivered a number of lectures in all those places. You get these lectures in *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* which is one of the best nation-building books we have in the

modern period. In the opening lecture delivered at Ramnad on 25 January, 1897, he struck this note of awakening. There he said:

The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awaking and a voice is coming to us—away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there... India, this motherland of ours—a voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in its utterances, and is gaining volume as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening! Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see... that she is awakening... None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet. (*CW*, III, pp. 145-146)

Then, reaching Madras, he pointed out that we had confined our religion only to temples, images, etc., and neglected man in our society. We could not see God in man though Vedanta has taught that God is there in every human being. Sri Ramakrishna himself taught this profound truth that every *jiva* is *Shiva*; service of the *jiva* is the worship of *Shiva*. But, for ages, we did not care for all these ideas. Instead, we concentrated only on temples, images, etc., and neglected human beings and exploited them. Yet we thought we were religious! With this in mind, Swamiji said: For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. There are millions and millions of gods in the form of human beings—love them, serve them, worship them. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time being from our minds.

That is a wonderful Vedantic message taught in the *Gītā*, in the Upanishads, as well as in the *Srimad Bhāgavatam*. The spirit of modern culture, the spirit of humanism to a great extent shot up from that great message of Vivekananda.

Swamiji gave a human orientation to our age-old spiritual heritage so that we might build up a new society based on human dignity, human freedom and human equality. These are great Vedantic ideas. And what happened? Vivekananda passed away in 1902. Within three years this profound message found expression in political action rousing the common people for the awakening of Bengal.

The West has laid stress on man, while we have laid stress on God. We shall see God in man and achieve here a new type of culture which is deeply spiritual on one side, and deeply humanistic on the other. We have missed that goal for centuries together. We have treated millions of people as if they were animals. Vivekananda describes that behaviour as a 'blot' on our society. Today you find casteism, untouchability, communal conflicts. In Swamiji's time these problems were brewing. Swamiji threw light upon them and declared: What we have to do as an awakened nation is to banish all these weaknesses and create a progressive socio-political order. The first thing that we needed was political freedom in order to shape our destiny in our own way. No foreign nation could shape our destiny, for they were here to fulfil their own purposes. So the first expression of the great Renaissance was our fight for freedom. Gigantic personalities arose in our midst. They spearheaded the agitation in Bengal and also the 'Swadeshi' agitation. Then came Tilak followed by Gandhi. The various political forces got strengthened and their main focus of attention was on attainment of political freedom. That was a

great saga in our recent history. In the end, we achieved political freedom.

It was in this period that we produced men like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Their leadership qualities, tremendous patriotism, courage and the heroic mould in which their minds were cast had been the inspiration for the national movement. Mahatma Gandhi was characterized by absolute fearlessness and absence of hatred for anybody. It is a rare quality always praised by our ancient scriptures. In the *Gītā* there is a beautiful *shloka* which suggests Gandhiji's character as we saw it in our time.

*Yasmān n'odvijate loko
lokān n'odvijate ca yah /
harshāmarsha-bhay'odvegair
mukto yah sa ca me priyah // (12.15)*

—'Those who are not a source of annoyance to anyone and who in turn are not agitated by anyone, who are equal in pleasure and pain, and free from fear and anxiety, such devotees are very dear to Me.'

Gandhi was so mentally strong that none could frighten him and yet so gentle that he frightened none. This is the quality of character we missed for centuries together, excepting a few saints and sages.

The post-Independence era

We achieved political freedom in 1947, exactly fifty years after Vivekananda's great speech at Ramnad in 1897. Then came the great problem, what shall we do with this freedom? We were yet to learn many more lessons from Vivekananda and other great teachers. Freedom was a great achievement but along with it came Partition. We got a chunk which we were to build up. So we started with ecstasy. But people soon began to forget the nation, forget the people and became self-centred; money-making for oneself

became the motto. All the evils that followed were spawned by this kind of attitude.

Swamiji said: So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance I hold every man a traitor, who having been educated at their expense, pays no heed to them. That was truly a great utterance. You are selfish if you, having been educated at the cost of the state, do not pay heed to the plight of the common people. That is treason. We have now got too many traitors of this kind in India. In one letter Swamiji wrote that they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive. Before Independence we had live people; after Independence we have spiritually dead ones, self-centred, not caring for the nation. Some of the evils which we managed to remove from our minds during the freedom struggle have returned to haunt us—smallness, pettiness and narrow attitudes. In the place of patriotic feelings, all sorts of linguistic, communal and caste prejudices have surfaced.

Politically we have seen failures several times in history. But Sardar Patel, the great leader, showed us that in politics also we can have foresight and tremendous wisdom. If we had continued to hold on to the spirit of consolidation which Patel represented, we would have become much more progressive than what we are today. But he did his work. India became a unified nation. Then in 1950 we gave ourselves a remarkably progressive Constitution. That was a great work. The Constituent Assembly in which we had very distinguished people, great intellectuals and great patriots of all communities, framed the Constitution. This was piloted by Dr Ambedkar, a remarkable personality. He suffered a lot from our society, its orthodoxy, its casteism, its untouchability, and yet he rose to the highest

level of intellectual strength. We can never forget the greatness of Ambedkar just as we cannot forget the great Sardar Patel, Nehru and others. So that was a time of gigantic personalities. Everything was great about them, nothing small, nothing petty. They spoke of the nation, they spoke of man, they spoke of the whole world. That was how we started our career as a sovereign democratic Republic from 26 January, 1950. The Indian Constitution contains profound ideas. It reflects the spirit of the ancient Upanishads, upholds the dignity of man, the unity of the nation, the freedom and equality of all human beings. All these beautiful ideas are there for the first time in the Constitution.

I generally characterize the Indian Constitution as the new *Smriti*. We have been governed by *Smritis* in India for ages. But *Smritis* are very discriminatory. They speak ill of the untouchables, lower classes, even women. So much of discrimination you will find in the *Smritis*! Those *Smritis* have been abolished. Now, in this Constitution we have got a new *Smriti*. Our Indian tradition tells us that *Shruti* will remain valid for all time because it contains the eternal, spiritual truths, dealing with the unity of man. That is the spirit of the *Shruti*, of the Upanishads. But the *Smritis* contain discriminatory ideas. According to the orthodox tradition of India, wherever there is a conflict between the *Shruti* and the *Smriti*, *Smriti* has to go, *Shruti* will prevail. Today, we have accomplished that task because our new *Smriti*, the Constitution, recognizes human dignity, human equality, human freedom by banishing the evil notions of untouchability and such other petty things. I call it therefore '*Ambedkar Smriti*'. Previously we had *Manu Smriti*, *Yājñavalkya Smriti* and

now you have this ‘*Ambedkar Smriti*’ where the great idea of equality has been proclaimed. All the wisdom of India went into the making of the Constitution.

So we got the Constitution. Well, but what is a Constitution? It is just a promise, a hope, which you have to translate into reality. But unfortunately, we have not succeeded in doing that to the extent we could. But the State that we have established today has a uniqueness which we never had before. What is that? It is that the State derives its sanction from the people of India. Previously in this country the State was ruled by one emperor, one military conqueror, or a strong person, maybe indigenous or maybe foreign. People were mere subjects, who had no particular part to play in the matter of governance. But now for the first time, in the five-thousand-year history of India we have established a Republican Democratic State which derives its sanction from the people of India. I wish that every student studies the Preamble and the Fundamental Rights portion of our Constitution to develop the will to translate the promises into a social reality. That will is lacking today. What we lack today is the human concern, patriotic dedication and work efficiency. That spirit must come to the nation. Our idea of religion must also become practical, leading to character development, spiritual awakening and spiritual growth.

Reshaping the nation

Religion has two dimensions—ethical and scientific. Your say won’t matter in the ethical dimension of the religion in which you are born. But the spiritual or scientific dimension is what you seek, what you choose. Nobody is born a physicist, or a chemist. One chooses one’s subject. Similarly, in the science of religion you

choose and you grow spiritually, while in ethnical religion you remain what you are. If you are selfish in the beginning, you are selfish in the end. If you are petty-minded in the beginning, you are petty-minded in the end. A few dos and don’ts, some rituals and ceremonies are all that you observe. That does not help the development of human character. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in modern times stressed this particular aspect of religion and inspired us to introspect if we have grown spiritually. You go to a temple, you go to a mosque or a church, or a gurudwara or any religious place, or sit in meditation. All is beautiful. But after all these, do ask yourself this question—‘Have I grown spiritually?’ That is the meaning of religion. The Divine in man must find manifestation. Out of that alone will come character and energy. That is what we are missing today in India.

Since Independence we have been witnessing the erosion of ethical and moral values in society. Is it for this that we achieved freedom? The reshaping of India in the modern period should be based upon those fundamental values which alone make man really a dignified and glorious individual. That is not there today. If I cannot wipe the tears of the distressed people around me, where is my strength? Where is my humanity? It was Vivekananda who first drew our attention to this weakness of our understanding of religion. He said, even if a dog is hungry in my country, my religion is to find food for the dog. We never thought in these terms before. If somebody is sick and starving in India, something is wrong with me and my philosophy. That philosophy has to change. I have to take in all others in my thinking. It is a wonderful idea. We have to develop it. *That* is true religion.

We are no more subjects of an empire. We are citizens of a free democracy and as citizens we have a social responsibility, a national responsibility. We must become 'modern' in true sense of the term. I am sorry to say that many people in India have a very wrong understanding of being 'modern'. Using modern gadgets does not make us modern. In that case the bears and monkeys in the Delhi zoo would be more modern than you and I. They get air conditioners. But that does not make a man modern. It is the mind that makes one truly modern. What sort of mind? First, it has to be scientific and rational. Secondly, it has to be intensely human, having tremendous concern for others. Everyone asks this question: Why, after so many years of freedom, have millions of Indians remained so poor and backward? Why so many millions are illiterate even today? I too have my responsibility as an inheritor of the legacy of the freedom struggle. All those who fought for freedom had wonderful ideas which we have quietly forgotten. A few enjoy the fruits of freedom without sharing them with others. That is a major problem that faces us today.

Even today we have the evils of caste and communalism. In spite of having such great leaders in the past, we still nurture feudalistic thinking. The most shameful things in free India today are the caste conflicts and communal conflicts, apart from bribery, corruption and other social malpractices. These are all blots on our free nation. Communal differences will be there in every society. I said in my previous lecture that we developed a culture in India based upon the vision of unity in diversity. We never destroyed diversity. We want this diversity, for diversity makes for richness and through this diversity there runs a thread of unity as well. We have built up a

culture based upon that unity. Therefore we must stress the concept of diversity. Every religion, every culture, every language has a place in India. But these should not become the means of destroying the unity of the nation. This wisdom must come to us today.

We have to get a new education. Though we are supposed to be educated we still need a re-education with respect to our concern for the people. How to become a servant of the nation? That idea is a great contribution of the Vivekananda literature. Those who have studied that literature thoroughly will love this country with a passion which will be unparalleled in our history. Mahatma Gandhi said in a lecture at the Belur Math in 1921, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission on Vivekananda's birthday: 'I have gone through his *Works* very thoroughly, and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country became a thousandfold.' In the same address, he appealed to young people, who had come to the Math, to take something of that inspiration from where Vivekananda lived and worked. That spirit must come to us today—the spirit of love for the common man without any consideration of caste, creed or colour. Build up an India based upon that unified mission. It is young people that must re-educate themselves in this field. We go to colleges, get degrees, get jobs, and then we forget everything else. We are only concerned with ourselves. That passion for the people, for the nation—that has become weakened a good deal. Therefore in the making of a new India everyone of us has a part to play. Till now we are passive subjects. We have to become active and dynamic citizens of free India. We always say the government will do. But what about myself? I have a great contribution to make.

I am a proud citizen of India. To have more of public spirit, more of concern for others is what Vivekananda calls the spirit of service. He said: ‘The national ideals of India are RENUNCIATION and SERVICE. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself.’ (CW, V, p. 228)

This is a profound utterance. *Tyāga* and *Sevā*. This little ‘I’ must go. In a true citizen the little ‘I’ becomes a big ‘I’ because of the sense of responsibility. Therefore *Tyāga* (renunciation) and its concomitant *Sevā* (service) must go together. That is a great work that demands our attention today. Then we can set fire to all the evils like caste and communal conflicts.

This land is a land of harmony. It must be made so once again. We have many communities, religions and sects. For thousands of years they have lived in peace here. Why is the trouble now? We have to make necessary political changes. We have to realize that a *secular state and communal political parties can never go together*. A secular state should have only secular political parties at all levels—in Parliament, Assemblies, and Panchayats, because every candidate to an election must be able to represent the interest of all the communities living in that area. If that happens, then and then only our secular

state will become truly secular. Today it is not. This is the most important work we have to do to achieve national integration. When Sardar Patel integrated the princely states he was only setting in motion a particular activity to integrate the whole nation.

Vivekananda has given a beautiful message to our people in a few beautiful sentences. He says—‘Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.’ (CW, III, p. 193) Vedanta says, infinite possibilities are hidden in every human being. Let us base ourselves on that Vedantic concept of imperishable and pure Ātman which is the centre of infinite energy. Great sages, great intellectuals, great scientists, great humanists will again appear in this country when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity. That is called Practical Vedanta by Swami Vivekananda. I quote his wonderful sentence which is an adaptation of the famous words of the *Kathopanishad*: ‘*Uttishthata jāgrata prāpya varānnibodhata*’—Arise, Awake and Stop not till the goal is reached. ■

Where The Mind Is Without Fear

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
 Where knowledge is free;
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
 By narrow domestic walls;
 Where words come out from the depth of truth;
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
 Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
 Where the mind is led forward by thee
 Into ever-widening thought and action—
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

—Rabindranath Tagore