



Swami Vivekananda and Empowerment of Masses

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KEYWORDS :

"He who is in you and outside you, Who works through all hands, Who walks on all feet, whose body is all ye, Him worship and break all other idols Ye fools! Who neglect the living God, And His infinite reflection, with which the world is full, While ye run after imaginary shadows, That lead alone to fight and quarrels, Him worship, the only visible! Break all other idols."

This particular verse was believed and practiced by the great saint of India, Swami Vivekananda. He was a saint in action, whose heart always pined for the poor and down-trodden masses of India. His exemplary love for the motherland and compassionate actions made him a legend in his life time. The whole life of the Swami was a saga of his relentless efforts towards this direction.

Unlike Sri Ramkrishna, Vivekanand was not a sadhaka, nor did he possess the philosophical depth or originality of Sri Aurobindo. His most precious possession, though, was an expansive heart that could weep at all the pains and misery that come to be experienced in this world and rejoice, too, in the smallest improvement in the human condition. Free India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Rooted in the past, full of pride in India's prestige, 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 ... he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past." Where can you find a man like him? Study what he wrote, and learn from his teachings, for if you do, you will gain immense strength. Take advantage of the fountain of wisdom, of Spirit, and of fire that flowed through Vivekananda and try to follow his teachings! The most prominent activities of swamiji were

- Service to the poor
- Education of women
- And education of masses
- Service to the poor:

Swami Vivekananda delivered a lecture on the issue of difficulties in life. He made the plea for the need for nationwide renovation with the ideals of 'tyaga' or sacrifice and 'seva', selfless service, the most imperative aspects of shaping the life of young people. The monk made the point that this way of life is what can be called 'spiritual pursuit'. The brevity of human triumph and the impermanence of material wealth were of serious thought to this philosophy. What he challenged us to do was to give ourselves a noble reason to live, a lofty ideal to live for and a higher state to reach within the boundaries of human existence.

The goal he set before his followers was not only the achievement of political freedom but also social and economic freedom. Unlike other saints, he did not offer prayers to the Almighty for his own salvation but sought salvation of the poor. He used to tell his fellowmen that you must have read – "Matrudevo Bhava, Pitrudevo Bhava" –but I say "Daridradevo Bhava, Murkh devo Bhava"– The poor, the illiterate, the afflicted, and the ignorant– let these be your God. Vivekanand practiced an important teaching of Sri Ramkrishna Paramhans , "Jiver shiva"- "Jiva is Shiva". He lived up to this ideals "May I be born again and again and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God that I believe in, the sum total of all souls... my God the poor of all races..... Him worship, the visible, the knowable, omnipresent; break all other idols".

He used to sing and make his followers sang the great patriotic song:

"Manasa Satatam Smaraniyam Bachasa Satatam Vadaniyam Lokahitam mam karaniyam."

मनसा शततम स्मरणयिम् वचसा शततम वदनयिम् लोकहितम मम करणयिम्

Onward forever! Sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, even unto death- this is our motto. Onwards, brave lads! Have faith in the lord; no policy, it is nothing. Feel for the miserable and look up for help-it shall come.... I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed..... Vow then to devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three millions, going down and down everyday. Go from village to village; do good to humanity and to the world at large. Go to hell yourself to buy salvation for others. In this regards he advised them to sacrifice all the luxuries.

"Na bhoga Bhuvane Ramaniyam Na cha Sukhe sayane sayaniyam Kast Parvate Charaniyam Lokahitam mam Karaniyam."

न भोग भुवने रमणयिम् न च सुखे शयने शयनयिम् कष्ट पर्वते चरणयिम् लोकहितम मम करणयिम्

At any cost he wanted to serve the poor. He told them, " My boy, when death is inevitable, is it not better to die like heroes than as stocks and stones?... It is better to wear out than to rust out- specially for the sake of doing the least good to others".

He wanted his fellowmen to reach the last of the last one in the miserable groups, thinking "Atmavat Sarva Bhuteshu"- "looking upon all beings as your own self"- . He advised Sarvodaya and Antodaya at a time.

"Gahanaranye ghora andhakare, Bandhujanah ja sthita Gahware, Tatra maya sancharaniyam Lokahitam mam karaniyam."

गहनारनये घोर अन्धकारे बन्धुजनाः य स्तति गव्हरे तत्र मया सन्चरणयिम् लोकहितम मम करणयिम्

In this context he spoke, Let us pray," Lead, kindly Light"- a beam will come through the dark, and a hand will be stretched forth to lead us. Let each one of us pray day and night for the down-trodden millions of Indians who are hold fast by poverty, priest craft and tyranny; pray day and night for them. I care more to preach them than to the high and the rich. I am no metaphysician, no philosopher, nay, no saint. But I am poor, I love the poor. Let these people be your God think of them, work for them, pray for them incessantly the lord will show you the way". He often had shown his concern for the masses.

Once he was delivering his spiritual discourses. One gentleman from Punjab came to listen his discourses. Seeing that man he got furious as those days Punjab was in famine. Instead of giving lecture on religion, Vivekanand spoke on ways and means of providing relief to the suffering masses. To the visitor it was a wasted visit. When he expressed his resentment, Vivekanand told him angrily: "Sir, so long as even a dog of his country went unfed, to feed it and to take care of it was his religion and that everything else was either non-religion/ false religion".

He did not only preach he lived every moment of his life to serve the Daridranarayana. His compassion transmitted to his disciples too. In the summer of 1897 during famine in the Murshidabad district of Bengal, Vivekananda's disciples dedicated themselves in providing relief to the suffering people. In 1898 when plague broke out Vivekananda, himself came to live in a poor locality and served the victims. He even cleaned the streets of the plague affected localities.

He advised the seeker of salvation, "If you seek your own salvation, you will go to hell. It is the salvation of others that you must seek.... and even if you go to hell in working for others, that is worth more than to gain heaven by seeking your own salvation..... Believe me, from the shedding of our life blood will arise gigantic, heroic workers and warriors of God who will revolutionise the world". At any cost he wished to serve the living God as he tells, "If you cannot worship your brother God, how can you worship a God who is unmanifested?"

Education of Women:

Swamiji was very worried for the plight of Indian women which is evident from a letter he wrote to Haripada Mitra from Chicago on December 28, 1893, "Oh, how free they (the American women) are! It is they who control social and civic duties..... and in our country, women cannot be safely allowed to walk in the streets!.... Here men treat their women as a manufacturing machine and no respect at all,and hence they are so prosperous, so learned, and so energetic. But why is it we are slavish, miserable and dead? The answer is obvious." Swami Vivekananda said emphatically, "There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on." He strongly reasoned the cause of such degradation of Indian women "The principal reason why our race has so degenerated is that we had no respect for these living images of Shakti. Manu says, "Yatra Nryasthu Pujyante ramante tatra devata", "Where women are respected, there the Gods delight, and where they are not, there all work and efforts come to naught." There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness. The Swami was particularly worried about the degradation of women in India. "In the West its ideal is wife, in India in the mother". The mother, being the epitome of love, service and sacrifice, has always commanded respect in the Indian society. He said in one of his lectures at Brooklyn, "In India the mother is the center of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the universe. It was a female sage who first found the unity of God, and laid down this doctrine in one of the first hymns of the Vedas. Our God is both personal and absolute; the absolute is male, the personal is female. And thus it comes that we now say: 'The first manifestation of God is the hand that rocks the cradle.'" In another speech at Pasadena, California he emphasized the aforesaid ideal again: "Now the ideal woman in India is the mother, first, and the mother last. The word 'woman' calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called the Mother."

Wifehood is another important facet of woman's life. The Indian wife practices self purification through fasts, prayers and penances before conceiving a baby. The conjugal union marks, "the greatest prayer between man and his wife, the prayer that is going to bring into the world another soul fraught with a tremendous power for good." Thus Swamiji approved of the Indian eugenics tradition which prescribed the couple's performing certain religious rites in association with garbhadhan, pumsavana, simant and jatakarma in order to beget babies of merit.

The ideal woman of Swamiji's conception was the one who combined in her the purity and chastity of Sita and Damayanti, the saintly disposition of brahmavadinis like Vachaknavi, Partitheyi and Vishvavara, the intellectual acumen of Gargi and Sulabha, the spiritual power of Savitri and Anusuya, and the physical strength and courage of Lakshmi Bai, the queen of Jhansi. Our Hindu women easily understand what chastity means, because it is their heritage. Now, first of all, intensify that ideal within them above everything else, so that they may develop a strong character by the force of which, in every stage of their life, whether married, or single if they prefer to remain so, they will not be in the least afraid even to give up their lives rather than flinch an inch from their chastity. Thus he wanted ladies to be of strong character.

It was the strong belief of Swami Vivekananda that if the women are

raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awake in the country. Swamiji had full faith that women could excel in all fields of human activity, if treated at par with men, and given proper education and training. He rejected the idea that they were incompetent to take up intellectual / spiritual pursuits by saying, "In which scriptures do you find statements that women are not competent for knowledge and devotion?" On the other hand he had complete trust on the efficiency of ladies when he told, "With five hundred men, the conquest of India might take fifty years; with as many women not more than a few weeks".

Swamiji was in the belief that the most important factor which hampered their progress was lack of the right kind of education. He continuously advocated, "Educate, educate and educate.... than this there is no other way". He wanted to give such an education to the Indian women as to "bring to the need of the India great fearless women- women worthy to continue the traditions of Sanghamitra, Lila, Ahilya Bai, and Mira Bai- women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and selfless...." At this juncture he used to admire even a bit of effort towards women education as: "Female education is to spread with religion as its centre. All other training should be secondary to religion. Religious training, the formation of character and observance of the vow of celibacy- which has obtained up till now in India, it is religion that has been made a secondary concern". He used to inspire girls by narrating the stories of Sita, Savitri, Lilavati, Anusuya and others, and inculcate the virtue of selflessness. As per the subjects he advised the girls to study science, arts, housekeeping, cooking, sewing, etc. at the same time he was very particular in not to allowing them to read novel, as these might pollute their minds." He also wanted them to learn drawing, modeling, painting and other fine arts, photography, cutting of design on paper, gold and silver filigree and embroidery. "See that everyone knows something by which she can learn a living in case of need." As per Swamiji Women should be taught history and the Puranas, housekeeping and the arts, the duties of home-life and principles that make for the development of an ideal character. He wanted to teach the ideals of renunciation, so that they may take up the vow of life-long dedication to God. He had a great hope that if even one amongst the women became a knower of Brahman, then by the radiance of her personality thousands of women would be inspired awakened to Truth, and great well-being of the country and society would ensure."

Today Swami Vivekananda's words have proved true. Following the footsteps of Sarada Devi and Sister Nivedita hundreds of women all over the world are coming forward with a combination of the 'mother's heart and the hero's will', a combination of the purity of Holy Mother and the dynamism of Rani of Jhansi or Joan of Arc. The rise of outstanding women administrators, statesmen, scientists, writers and spiritual teachers, is gradually proving the truth of these prophetic words.

Education for Masses:

In a letter to Alasinga Perumal, Swami Vivekananda wrote "I do not believe in a God or Religion that does not bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth or wipe away the widow's tears." In another place he says, "Half a loaf of bread is better than no bread at all." Such strong statements reflect his constant concern for the common man and his vision of a religion that is at once practical and provides the individual with the inspiration to know and seek God. It also shows the socialist side of his nature. Swami Vivekananda was deeply troubled by the inequities that prevailed in Indian Society. His heart always cried for the masses as he saw the misery and poverty of people while wandering as a monk. He expressed his feelings in these words, "My heart aches to think of the conditions of the poor, the low, in India. They sink lower and lower every day. They feel blow showered upon them by a cruel society, but they do not know when the blow comes. They have forgotten that they too are men. My heart is too full to express my feelings. So long as millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them. Our great national sin is the neglect of the masses and that is the cause of our downfall". In his letter to the Maharaja of Mysore in June 1894 he wrote, "The one thing that is at the root of all evils in India is the condition of the poor.... The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. That is the great task be-

tween our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction. Priest—power and foreign conquest have trodden them down for centuries, and at last the poor of India have forgotten that they are human beings. “Education, education, education alone! Travelling through many cities of Europe and observing in them the comforts and education of even the poor people, there was brought to my mind the state of our own poor people, and I used to shed tears. What made the difference? Education was the answer I got.”

No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for.” He argued that a nation was advanced to the extent the education and culture reached the masses. Unless there is uniform circulation of national blood all over the body, the nation could not rise. He insisted that it was the duty of the upper classes to come forward and uplift the poor through education and other means. Hence he exhorted his young followers to reach out to the masses and educate them. Now if the Mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the Mountain. If the poor boy cannot come to education, education must go to them. Why should not education go from door to door, say I. If a ploughman’s boy cannot come to education, why not meet him at the plough, at the factory, just wherever he is? Go along with him, like his shadow.” In this regard he wrote to a group of monks, “A hundred thousand men and women, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with the external faith of the lord, nerved to lion’s courage by their sympathy for the poor and the down-trodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of love, help, the gospel of social rising up and the gospel of equality.” He wanted the greater part of the education to the poor should be given orally. By education he wanted to develop their lost individuality. Thus, he points out the urgent need of mass education in India. He felt that education in India is monopolized by a handful of men, and the education of the masses is ignored. He suggested that everything should be done so that the common man may recover his lost identity. The gems of spirituality stored in our sacred books should be brought to the common man. This can be done by spreading education through the medium of mother-tongue. Hence Swamiji proclaimed mass education through mother tongue is the only weapon to develop the Nation. He was interested in teaching people about the necessities of life, trade, commerce, agriculture and a little of technical education, so that they might find work and earn their bread, instead of dawdling about and crying for job. The education which does not help the common mass to equip them for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion- is it worth the name? He desired that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet.

Thus, Swami Vivekananda practiced and preached the high ideals Service to man is service to God and salvation can only be attained by helping the poor and the down-trodden. He founded Sri Ramkrishna Math and Mission on the principle of Atmano Mokshartham, Jagat- Hitaya Cha – For one’s own salvation and for the welfare of the world. The main activities of the mission were:

- Charitable work among the poor,
- Missionary work for diffusing the principles of Vedant and the teachings of Sri Ramkrishna
- Organisation of education for bringing enlightenment to the people

Now also these organizations are acting on these principles and spreading Swamiji’s message of grass-root reforms i.e. development of the last man in the society.

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