

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON THE REGENERATION OF INDIA

Swami Paratparananda

Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – February 1967; Vol. 53; page 419

I

GREAT sages have an unlimited view of what is to come and how best it can be achieved. Nay, they give a new turn to events that are to happen, strike a new path, smoothening the rugged terra and avoiding the abysmal hollows that might have been carved on the beaten track by vested interests. The natural human tendency is to go easy, take everything easy and reap as maximum a benefit as the circumstances allow. That is why in every age sages and Incarnations have to appear and give redress to and reform mankind. Sri Krishna says about Karma Yoga, 'This Yoga, handed down through generations, was known to the Rajarshis, but due to the long passage of time has been lost here (in this world).'¹ This happens in regard to every ideal. The zeal for the ideal lessens due to several reasons: (1) when the ideal is taken-over by ill-equipped aspirants, (2) when it becomes only a cover for exploitation, (3) when the aspirants break off from the enthusiasm and spirit with which they start, and when there creeps in laxity of purpose. The first two need not be discussed here. But the last one, the laxity in purpose, we have to admit is the outcome of a lack of conviction regarding the ideal. Sri Ramakrishna convincingly proves this by an illustration. 'Suppose there is a store of gold in a room and only a thin partition separates it from a thief. Will the thief remain idle? Will he not feel restless to get it?' We relax because we are more after our comforts than intent on our purpose. We become privilege minded. And that in turn makes us stoop to means fair or foul to secure those privileges. Thus runs the down-grade path until we know not how far we have gone. So in this hunt for privileges people carve out hollows in the declared path and mislead others into them. Then comes the necessity for an Incarnation or a great sage to retrieve humanity.

Swami Vivekananda came, gave his message and left his mortal coil as well. It is some decades now. But his message was not for the hour, nor only for India but to the humanity as a whole.

¹ Bhagavad Gita, IV.2.

What was his message to India, for her regeneration? There were many reform societies in his time, each with a limited view trying to cater to some decadent branch of the tree of the Indian social fabric. But Swami Vivekananda was not in a hurry to do anything spectacular for the time being. He studied the situation; he studied the disease; he investigated the symptoms. He travelled far and wide. He allowed his mind to absorb all that he saw, as also to crystallize ideas by themselves. From his observation and study of the history of nations he came to one conclusion, that 'each nation has its own part to play, and naturally, each nation has its own peculiarity and individuality, with which it is born. Each represents, as it were, one peculiar note in this harmony of nations, and this is its very life, its vitality. In it is the backbone, the foundation, and the bed-rock of the national life.... Here in this blessed land, the foundation, the backbone, the life-centre is religion and religion alone. In India, religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life'. Such was his diagnosis and naturally appropriate was his treatment. He said, 'So, in India, social reform has to be preached by showing how much more spiritual a life the new system will bring; and politics has to be preached by showing how much it will improve the one thing that the nation wants — its spirituality.'

It is not a dogma of a religious fanatic that Swamiji puts forth here. Because we are experiencing the effects of the neglect of this sane advice everyday. Our social reform done with a vengeance, as it were, is only sowing seeds of hatred, of narrowness in outlook, of embitterments, and the consequences follow with unimpeded force, bewildering thinking men and women as to where all this will end. You may ask: What about those people in other nations who have not accepted spirituality as their basis? We are only trying to imitate them. If they can survive why can we not? Well, it requires a prophet to make a right choice of life. And as Swami Vivekananda says, 'We made our choice ages ago and we must abide by it. And, after all, it is not such a bad choice.' Spirituality has penetrated into the very nerves and sinews of our being. It has become our very nature. If you try to change the nature of a material by any means it would not remain the same material again. It will be something else. And the new matter that is produced will not serve the purpose for which the old material was meant. Similarly you cannot change your nature and survive as a nation.

Swamiji emphatically declares, 'For good or for evil, our vitality is concentrated in our religion. You cannot change it. You cannot destroy it and put in its place another.... You can only work under the law of least resistance, and this religious line is the line of least resistance in India. This is the line of life, this is the line of growth, and this is the line of well-being in India—to follow the track of religion.'

Other nations are made out quite differently. The material, the equipment and the tradition that made them also are different and even they, as days pass we see, are searching to find out on what better

principles, on what better basis the solidarity of their race could be built up. Materialism has lost its charm and people are groping for something substantial, something ever-lasting; the appeal of humanitarianism alone is also not satisfying, for it breaks down when it comes in conflict with selfish interest. Should we then throw away our heritage and take up the things that are being discarded even by others as unsubstantial? We must be wary before we commit ourselves. This is an age of speed, yielding rapid revolutionary harvests in every sphere. If we are not cautious we may leave to posterity a legacy which it will find difficult to live by or throw off for centuries to come.

Besides, we have to take heed of the warning given by Swami Vivekananda. 'If any nation attempts to throw off its national vitality, the direction which has become its own through the transmission of centuries, that nation dies, if it succeeds in the attempt.'

Swami Vivekananda did not stop with placing this idea before us, but he worked for its implementation, to revive the drooping religious fervour in the country. For as he said, 'Religion and religion alone is the life of India, and when that goes India will die, in spite of politics, in spite of social reforms, in spite of Kubera's wealth poured upon the head of everyone of her children'.

Swami Vivekananda, we must remember, was not against material prosperity. On the other hand, we know that the main purpose of his going to the West was to search means to ameliorate the condition of the masses. And after his return from the West he stressed that India should learn science from the West to increase the wealth of the nation and improve the condition of the man at large. But this did not make him ignore the vital question. At the time he advocated the cultivation of scientific knowledge he also gave the warning that has been referred to above, the gist of which is that we must not lose our spiritual moorings, in our pursuit of material prosperity.

II

What did Swami Vivekananda mean by religion or spirituality? If we go through his works we shall find that to him religion did not constitute in merely some external observances, or dogmas or creeds. It was a way of life, a transformation of the inner man. "Religion," he said, "is realization," realization of God, of our inner Being, of Brahman or by whatever name you may call it.

According to this definition we have to live the life in such a way that in the end it will lead us to that ultimate Reality. And this is not the work of the anchorite alone. If it were so it will be the religion of a few thousands only. But India is much more than that. Man in every stage of his life should uncover such an attitude, breathe out such an atmosphere. It is all a preparation. It is like ploughing the land and making it ready to

receive the seed in the proper season. Unless we are trained early in life to discipline our minds and tune it to a higher purpose, it is not possible to change overnight into a saint, a sage. And unless one has become a sage he has not reached religion according to the above definition of Swami Vivekananda.

You may wonder, why such a pessimistic attitude is put forth. If we have to be true to our concept of religion we cannot but state what are facts. What then about all that take place in the name of religion, i.e., all rituals, and other practices? Let us give a parallel illustration. According to a definition given by Sri Sankara the word *Upanisad* means knowledge that destroys the cause of worldly existence viz., ignorance, and leads to liberation, loosening all bonds of this world. But traditionally and conventionally when we utter the word *upanisad* some book is meant. Sankara explains that though a book as such cannot free us from ignorance, but because the book contains the knowledge which when realized sets us free, it can justifiably be termed *upanisad*. He then cites an ancient saying of such usage: 'Clarified butter is indeed life'.² Similarly all that leads to realization is also called religion.

Another objection that may be raised here is: why should we devote our whole life to it? Have there been no cases of sudden transformation? Well, it is not a rule but an exception. And all of us cannot be exceptions, for in that case it will not be an exception but a rule. And we do not see any such rule prevalent in this world. If it were so we would all, the moment we get disgusted with this world, be transformed into higher beings. And no one can say that he had not at some time or other, experienced a distaste for life, however momentary it might have been. These fleeting moments are of course good but unless their frequency increases and till they leave a permanent impress on the mind they will be useless for the present life of that person. That is why it was said by the wise men of the olden times that one should be 'Religious while yet young.'

Why did India pitch upon this choice viz., spirituality as its basis? There is a significant verse in the *Bhagavad Gita* which brings this to the fore. 'What purpose is served by the wells and tanks, is served in a much better way by the flood, (an extensive reservoir), likewise all the results of actions and sacrifices prescribed in the Veda come to a *brahmana* who has attained knowledge (of Brahman).'³ India did not make this choice therefore inadvertently or by any mischance. Its sages deliberated over all that went before it, as also all that went against it and then firmly held on to the religious ideal. They had no doubt, whatsoever, that this would be for India's good, nay for the good of the world too.

² See Sri Sankara's Introduction to the commentary on Kathopanisad.

³ Bhagavad Gita, II.46.

How do we justify that everything is included in this ideal? What about ethics? Well, it is foolish to think of living the life of the spirit without a moral foundation. One who has not abstained from wicked deeds can never even dream of leading a holy life. If any man poses as holy and yet be immoral, he only tries to deceive others, as also himself.

Some Western scholars have imputed that there has been no stress on ethics in the Hindu scriptures. To this we might answer that ethics was not the goal, the be-all and end-all of the Hindu life. It was only a means. Besides, in ancient India religion was taught through personal contact and what was necessary to be taught was the highest value, the other side, the moral side, being communicated by example. It is a pity that these scholars do not go deeper down into the subject and take cognizance of the lives lived according to the injunctions of the scriptures. For then the ethical rigour involved therein will be obvious even for a superficial observer if he cares to note the good points in the Hindu system. Perhaps, their approach, far from being sympathetic, has been antagonistic, with a view to find out some way of showing Hinduism at a disadvantage, with some ulterior motive. Otherwise, a single verse of the *Mundakopanisad* is enough to silence these critics. "To him, who had approached in the proper manner, whose mind had attained quiescence, who has controlled his sense organs, the wise one (the preceptor), should teach that knowledge of Brahman by which he could know the immutable reality termed *Purusa*, in His true perspective."⁴ What greater morality or ethical eminence can we expect anywhere? And what severe code of conduct one has had to pass through to attain quietness of the mind, which includes the wiping out of the ego, can best be known through experience. To those who want to criticize Hinduism about the so-called ethical lacunae we would ask to cultivate this one virtue, which Hinduism insists on the aspirants to liberation to follow, and then come out with their experience frankly. Many, we are sure, will fail miserably. The very fact that they are out to slander others shows their 'holier than thou' attitude which is the corner stone of the edifice of egotism and not spirituality or religion.

So, in spiritual attainment is also included the perfection of morality and heights of humanism. A spiritual man does not become like a stock or a stone but feels for the entire humanity. He feels not only for those who are his kith and kin, not only for those of the same caste, of the same faith, but for all, without distinction; nay his sympathy reaches beings which in our ordinary mortal eyes are in the lower order in the animal kingdom. Such an attitude alone can save India from degenerating and not factions and fights over paltry things. And this attitude cannot be developed until the unity of our being is stressed, practised and realized

⁴ Mundaka Up. I.ii.13.

in life. At least an intellectual basis must first be laid for this purpose, the masses should be educated towards this end. By feeding them with the poison of hatred and jealousy we are only ruining the chances of a recovery that is most essential at the present time, if we have to consolidate the freedom that has been gained and be of use in the comity of nations.

It may be asked: Spirituality is a personal affair; why should it be linked with the regeneration of a country? To this we would put the counter question: What do you mean by the country? Is it the geographical state or the persons inhabiting it? The geographical state is inert. It does not do any violence to the rules of Nature and therefore needs no correction. If you say that you are concerned with the people of the country, with persons, is it unreasonable to say that men and women of the land should have a higher motive and live up to it for the upliftment of their status? Swami Vivekananda points out, 'The basis of all systems social or political, rests upon the goodness of men. No nation is great or good because Parliament enacts this or that, but because its men are great and good. Men are more valuable than all the wealth of the world'. He continues, 'When you have men who are ready to sacrifice their everything for the sake of their country, sincere to the backbone — when such men arise, India will become great in every respect. Then only will India awake when hundreds of large-hearted men and women giving up all desires of enjoying the luxuries of life, will long and exert themselves to their utmost, for the well-being of the millions of their countrymen'. How is this possible unless we feel our affinity, oneness with the masses? How can we feel oneness with them until we know that they are the same Lord manifesting in various forms? In short, except through religion? That is why Swamiji said that all our reforms should have religion as their basis. That is the only firm ground where it is not possible to stumble.

Further, he emphasised the necessity of unity. 'The first plank in the making of a future India, the first step that is to be hewn out of that rock of ages, is the unification of religion. All of us have to be taught that we Hindus have certain common ideas behind us, and that time has come when for the well-being of ourselves, for the well-being of our race, we must give up all little quarrels and differences. National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune.'

If we are earnest in the well-being of our country we should rise above our petty selfishnesses, and think of the nation. Everyone of us has to do it. There is nothing that cannot be achieved when we become united. Even the scarcity of food that we feel now will be borne cheerfully once we unite and try to share and share equally all that we have with one and all. How is it possible unless we overcome our selfishnesses? Let

us start to put this idea of Vedanta, of seeing God in everyone, in the practical field. Then everything will go on smoothly. All the rubs and frictions and clashes are due to the projection of our selfish interests. Regeneration of India is not possible unless this idea of Vedanta is practised in the day-to-day life.

III

Swami Vivekananda's other suggestions regarding the regeneration of India were education, uplift of women, reformation of the social fabric keeping in view the cultural background and religious basis, and uplift of the masses. Each one of these are to be deeply pondered over and made part of our life if we mean to revive India to her past glory and make it a useful member of this world.