

Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Mission & Nation-building

Discerning students of Indian history will understand that our country underwent an incredible transformation in the 18th century. For about a thousand years, it was as if the entire country was in a deep slumber. We lost our land, our freedom, our social traditions & structure, our prosperity, our very individuality. None of it seemed to bother us at all. Then from the end of the 18th century onwards began a new chapter in our national history. We suddenly started waking up.

As with individuals, so with nations. Such drastic transformations occur only in the wake of a tremendous soul-searching. Only, in India's case, the heart-rending self-introspection occurred in the soul of a single person. This person had expanded his consciousness to identify himself with the entire nation. He himself confessed that he was a "Condensed India"¹. With his self-identity established as the Nation itself, he conducted a brutal self-introspection. He took stock of what his strengths were and what his weaknesses. He was an adept in meditation and hence this exercise was something that was natural to him.²

It wasn't just thoughts that he was dealing with here. It was a series of spiritual visions that he saw. The difference between the two is that thoughts can be conjured up by a fertile imagination, while a spiritual vision is seen only when a new faculty of perception through the soul opens up in us. He had long ago perfected himself in this new type of seeing. He was a monk. Swami Vivekananda was his name. It is yet another great irony of history that when he engaged in thus transforming the destiny of India, he was just another unknown saffron-clad wanderer, with no name or home, not even knowing where he would have his next meal! Yet, within a decade of this momentous event, he was literally worshipped as a god and hailed as a Prophet in India and abroad.

What exactly did he see during the 'self-introspection' that we mentioned earlier? And what was the fall-out of that exercise for us Indians? That will form the subject matter of this article.

Swamiji went on a nation-wide fact-finding mission, to educate himself about the real situation of the masses. He travelled from 1888 to 1892, experiencing the life of the King and the beggar and the entire spectrum of society in between. He reached Cape Comorin (presently Kanyakumari) sometime in Dec 1892³. He had travelled over the entire eastern India, most of north India, large swathes of Western

¹ Cf: *Life of Swami Vivekananda*; Eastern & Western Disciples; Vol-1; Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata; Pg 346

² Cf: His letter of March 19, 1894, to Swami Ramakrishnananda, written from Chicago, vide Letter No. XLI; *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*; Vol-6, Epistles, 2nd series.

³ Cf: *Life of Swami Vivekananda*; Eastern & Western Disciples; Pg 346-7, life-vol-1: He travelled all over India and then reached Kanyakumari on 22nd Dec 1892. He sat on a rock and meditated for 3 days, from 24th Dec to 26th Dec.

India, important centers of the Konkan and Malabar Coast. He realized that Indian society had three vital problems.

1. The masses (i.e. the lower castes) and women (of all castes) had been grossly neglected and tortured. This was the first weakness.
2. Secondly, people of all castes and religions and races in India had completely lost all enthusiasm for life. They lacked the *joie de vivre* that is natural in living human beings. Indians forgot that they were an indispensable part of the rest of the world. They had sort of retreated into a cocoon, as it were. They had gotten frozen in time, as it were. While the rest of the world had moved on to a new mode of living, ushered in by the Rise of Islam, the European Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, India had frozen in the medieval ages.
3. India was a unique nation in the sense that religion was its life-breath. The successive onslaught of Islam and Christianity had left the nation gasping for breath, as it were. Very soon, the nation would stop breathing if it could not organically integrate these two religions within its own body-politick of Hinduism. The presence of these two religious forces, unintegrated, was sucking the life-force away from the Nation, as it were.

As with individuals, so with nations; the first step lies in accepting our drawbacks, our weaknesses, our problems. Once we reconcile ourselves to the problems we have, from within the depths of our own being rises up the solutions thereof. Same happened with Swamiji. When he had clearly analyzed the problems the country faced, which he was now experiencing as problems that he himself was facing, from within his own depths arose the solution thereof! And what a solution it was!

As with individuals, so with nations; one has to help oneself. We cannot depend on others to draw us out of the morass we find ourselves in. India had to help herself, if she wished to survive. The igniting spark of self-help, he would strike in the Indian society, using his band of monks, decided Swamiji, sitting in meditation on the last rock of India at Cape Comorin. He would direct his brother monks and his disciples to start working out the solutions. He would organize them into formal groups. And what would these monks do? They would impart two kinds of information to the masses. On the one hand, they would educate them about the huge fund of knowledge discovered in Europe that had given rise to the modern world. This would include science, technology and the social sciences. On the other hand, they would preach the essential message of the Upanishads, the message of the true nature of man, the message of a new faculty of perception present potentially in every one of us. While the former education would remove the daily wants of Indians, the latter education would fulfil the primal dissatisfaction that is an

existential component of human beings. Further, it is only when a person realizes his true nature that he can truly and genuinely harmonize other religions within himself and not before. For, intellectual understanding goes only thus far and no further, when it comes to harmonizing religious differences.

He established the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission⁴, two organizations, headquartered at Belur Math in Howrah. His brother monks and his disciples were its members. Why two organizations?⁵ The Math would cater to the spiritual education of the masses, while the Mission would cater to the rest of the activities that Indian society needed to molt itself out of its slough. Only monks would be members of the Math, while monks and married people could both be members of the Mission. In due course, these two organizations were registered with appropriate authorities as legal entities. These two organizations represented two limbs, as it were, of the Indian renaissance movement that Swamiji initiated. While the Math kept firm grip over the timeless and essential traditions of India's spiritual culture, the Mission attended to the problems of humanity, and served the needy and hapless as part of the spiritual discipline of the members.

Let us have a quick recap of the main points covered till now: Swamiji wanted to instill the idea of self-help in his fellow countrymen. There was all round deterioration in the standard of living, which had to be immediately addressed. Whether it was activities aimed at educating & upskilling ourselves, or activities aimed at famine, disaster or epidemic relief, we had to learn how to do it ourselves, instead of looking up to our 'leaders' for help. In an unprecedented burst of activity, work started on all fronts. His brother disciple Swami Akhandananda started an orphanage in Murshidabad, while his own disciples started a hospital in Haridwar & Benares. He himself spearheaded the plague relief operations in Kolkata. His brother disciple Swami Saradananda started an informal coaching center in Howrah, while his own disciple Sister Nivedita started a Girls' school in Kolkata. Having planted the potent seed, Swamiji left the world, bequeathing a unique legacy of 'worshipping God in man' to his followers. This was to be the new ritual for ushering in a new age in India. The gist of his virile message to Indians seemed to be⁶

⁴ Readers may kindly note that we have dealt with the impact of Swamiji's work on India in this article. There is a larger international impact of his work, which will be dealt with elsewhere. Interested readers may also kindly refer to '*The General Report of Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission-April 2014*'; published & issued by General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah, West Bengal – 711 202; pp 138-163; & *The Story of Ramakrishna Mission: Swami Vivekananda's vision & fulfilment*; Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata; pp: 323-529.

⁵ Interested readers may kindly refer: *The Story of Ramakrishna Mission: Swami Vivekananda's vision & fulfilment*; Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata; pp: 3-15. In the masterly '*Introduction*', the Editors have given a detailed analysis of Swami Vivekananda's plans for India and how he designed Ramakrishna Mission to achieve those ends.

⁶ Cf: *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*; Vol-4, Translation of a review of *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* by Prof. Max Müller, contributed to the *Udbodhan*, 14th March, 1899: "...and, above all, to show that the whole Aryan population of India had not as yet come down so low as to be on the same plane as the brute creation, that, rejecting the latter, the living Gods in human shape..."

Or, Cf: *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*; Vol-4, Translation: Poems: To a Friend:

‘What idols will you worship when the living image of God, man, cries for food and medicines and education?’ He himself thundered, “We shall forget for the time being all the gods and goddesses and worship the ‘other god’ called ‘man’⁷”. “For the next fifty years, let your country be your god”⁸.

What is important for us to note is the new ritual he initiated through the Ramakrishna Mission. India had never worked along these lines before, although there had always been a philosophy that sustained this kind of thinking. He said, “*The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of temples. If I cannot worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage. The moment I have realized God sitting in the temple of every human body, the moment I stand in reverence before every human being and see God in him — that moment I am free from bondage, everything that binds vanishes, and I am free. This is the most practical of all worship. It has nothing to do with theorizing and speculation.*”⁹ This has translated into a very potent spiritual practice today in the Indian society, slowly providing the leaven for the tremendous growth that has already set in. This world is divine. The men and women around us are divine. We ourselves are divine. Nothing petty or small or constricting henceforth in our activities or thought or words. All our activities shall be one, seamless worship of the divine by the divine.

We can gauge the power unleashed by this Prophet of New India by looking at the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission in the 100 years since his passing away. Today we have over 1417 educational institutions imparting academic and livelihood skills to over 3.28 lakhs boys and girls annually. There are over 1168 dispensaries, mobile medical units and hospitals rendering vital medical aid to over 81 lakhs beneficiaries annually. Around Rs. 14 crores was spent in different kinds of Relief & Welfare activities in which over 41 lakhs beneficiaries received assistance. Around 26,000 boys & girls received skill

From highest Brahman to the yonder worm, And to the very minutest atom, ...
...These are His manifold forms before thee, Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?
Who loves all beings without distinction, He indeed is worshipping best his God.

⁷ Cf: *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda: Vol-8: Buddha's Message to the World* (Delivered In San Francisco, On March 18, 1900): “Man loved God and had forgotten all about his brother man. The man, who in the name of God can give up his very life, can also turn around and kill his brother man in the name of God. That was the state of the world. They would sacrifice the son for the glory of God, would rob nations for the glory of God, would kill thousands of beings for the glory of God, and would drench the earth with blood for the glory of God. This was the first time they turned to the other God — man. It is man that is to be loved. It was the first wave of intense love for all men — the first wave of true unadulterated wisdom — that, starting from India, gradually inundated country after country, north, south, east, west.”

⁸ Cf: *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: Future of India*: “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. This is the only god that is awake, our own race — “everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything.” All other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all round us, the *Virât*? When we have worshipped this, we shall be able to worship all other gods.”

⁹ Cf: *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda: Vol-2: Practical Vedanta: Part II* (Lecture delivered In London, 12th November 1896)

development training in over 700 skill development centers. Apart from the educational and healthcare activities in the rural tribal areas, the Mission spent over Rs. 41 crores on purely rural & tribal development activities.¹⁰

Looking at the figures mentioned above, a question may be raised by the reader. ‘What are these numbers in a country that has over a billion people?’ True. Quantitatively, these numbers may not even be a blip in the national statistics. But they do serve one very important function. And that was one of the main outcomes that Swamiji had in mind when he started the Ramakrishna Mission. We must remember the actual circumstances in India when Swamiji initiated these activities. We were a servile people then. For anything and everything, we looked up to our overlords, the British, (or the Mughal rulers before the British, or the local rulers, in most cases) for direction and help. Centuries of servitude had rendered us incapable of self-organizing. The Ramakrishna Mission started in 1899 incorporating the true democratic principles of ‘Self-help’, ‘Self-governance’ ensured by a charter, elections for appointing office-bearers, etc, and ‘Transparency of financial accounting’. Fifty years after this exercise, India gained political independence and today, all our national institutions are designed to run along these democratic principles. However, there is *one vital ingredient* in the workers associated with the Ramakrishna Mission which makes them stick to the founding principles *in letter and in spirit*, which is the attitude of ‘**Service to man is service to God**’, ingrained in them scrupulously by the ethos of the Mission. Lacking this attitude makes a travesty of every democratic principle in institutions, which we sadly see in many cases in our country today. The Nation has yet to learn this important lesson from Ramakrishna Mission. National institutions have to be managed with a particular attitude. And that attitude is ‘*Shiva jnane-jiva seva*’¹¹. Institutions are not vehicles for self-aggrandizement, but vehicles for social development. Individual development cannot occur in isolation. It is only when the whole develops that the parts thereof develop too. When democratic institutions are run by people without this attitude of ‘Service to man is service to God’, what results is something popularly known as ‘corruption’. Swamiji repeatedly pointed out that ‘Renunciation & Service are the twin ideals for India’¹². Any work that we do has to

¹⁰ Interested readers may kindly see ‘*The General Report of Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission-April 2014*’; published & issued by General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah, West Bengal – 711 202. More latest information about the activities of the Math & Mission are available on the official website: www.belurmath.org

¹¹ Cf: *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda: Vol-3: Lectures from Colombo to Almora: Future of India: What is needed is Chittashuddhi*, purification of the heart. And how does that come? The first of all worship is the worship of the *Virat* — of those all around us. Worship It. Worship is the exact equivalent of the Sanskrit word, and no other English word will do. These are all our gods — men and animals; and *the first gods we have to worship are our countrymen*. These we have to worship, instead of being jealous of each other and fighting each other.

¹² Cf: *Complete works of Swami Vivekananda: Vol-5: Reawakening of Hinduism on a National Basis (Interview published in Prabuddha Bharata, September, 1898)*: The national ideals of India are **Renunciation** and **Service**. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself.

proceed from this locus within us. Renunciation of the smaller for the larger, and looking upon others are divine. I need nothing from the work I do. All results accrue to the larger entity, be it a family, an institution, or the Nation itself. I, who perform the work, am divine, and all others, who work with me, and are recipients of the outcomes of the work, are divine. This is the attitude.

Ramakrishna Mission does not claim to be a vehicle for the development of the entire Nation, in terms of quantity. For development on such massive scale, governmental machinery is indispensable. But, Ramakrishna Mission *does* claim¹³ to be a vehicle for the development of the entire Nation in the sense that it stands as an object lesson with reference to the ‘attitude’ with which the nation’s work has to be done. Institutions are there, money is being spent, yet visible development doesn’t happen in society. When national planners and leaders start worrying about this discrepancy, Ramakrishna Mission stands before them as a beacon of light showing the way. The attitude of the people involved in the developmental activity is what finally decides the fruitfulness of the activity.

India has come a very long way in a very short time. We have great optimism that the small course correction required to set our Nation soaring to the heights of true all-round development will soon set in. And the Prophet’s dream will indeed see the light of day in the near future.

¹³ For a detailed & masterly analysis of what ails Indian institutions today, please refer: *Redesigning the aeroplane while flying: Reforming Institutions*; Arun Maira; Rupa Publications, New Delhi; 2014. Against the backdrop of such in-depth analysis, the potential worth of the contribution of Ramakrishna Mission to our national institutions stands out in clear perspective.