

THE MONK WHO SHAPED INDIA'S SECULARISM

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Swami Vivekananda believed in the philosophy of *sarva dharma sama bhava* (all religions lead to the same goal). | Photo Credit: [SRR](#)

Has Indian nationalism turned utterly exclusivist? What would one of the icons of nationalism, Swami Vivekananda, have to say about this shift? Nationalism, after all, is a battle for the myths that create a nation.

The practice of Indian secularism, despite its pitfalls, has distinguished the country from many of its neighbours. India is the nation with the third-highest number of Muslims in the world. Its ability to consolidate democracy amidst unprecedented diversity could teach a lesson or two even to advanced industrial economies that have operated along the lines of a classic monocultural nation. The country's secular ideals have their roots in its Constitution, promulgated by its people, a majority of whom are Hindus. Would this state of affairs change because a different morality, Hindu nationalism, has surreptitiously overtaken India's tryst with secular nationalism?

Indian secularism has always attempted, however imperfectly, to respect the credo of *sarva dharma sama bhava* (all religions lead to the same goal), which translates to an equal respect for all religions. However, the early-day Hindu nationalists were clearly at odds with the idea. This was the reason Nathuram Godse assassinated one of its strongest proponents, Mahatma Gandhi.

For the likes of Godse, a corollary of the two-nation theory was that independent India was primarily a land for Hindus. More than 70 years after Independence, this notion has gained prominence as never before in India's post-colonial history. This is evident when the Central government says it will consider all Hindus in neighbouring countries as potential Indian citizens. The most recent example of this is the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim-majority State, into two Union Territories, with all special provisions taken away from the erstwhile State's residents.

Not only were Kashmiris not consulted, they were made to suffer an information blackout. Does this kind of Hindu nationalism align with the cosmopolitan nature of India's millennial traditions?

Another question that needs to be asked is: Is it fair to appropriate Swami Vivekananda, another follower of the *sarva dharma sama bhava* philosophy whom Prime Minister Narendra Modi keeps citing, as a Hindutva icon?

Here, it is necessary to understand what Vivekananda's life and world view said about Indian nationalism. His Chicago lectures (1893) marked the beginning of a mission that would interpret India's millennial tradition in order to reform it and he later spent about two years in New York, establishing the first Vedanta Society in 1894. He travelled widely across Europe and engaged Indologists such as Max Mueller and Paul Deussen. He even debated with eminent scientists such as Nicola Tesla before embarking on his reformist mission in India.

One of the key elements of his message, based on the experiments of his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was that all religions lead to the same goal. Paramahansa is unique in the annals of mysticism as one whose spiritual practices reflect the belief that the ideas of personal god and that of an impersonal god as well as spiritual practices in Christianity and in Islam all lead to the same realisation.

While in Chicago, Vivekananda stressed three important and novel facets of Hindu life. First, he said that Indian tradition believed “not only in toleration” but in acceptance of “all religions as true”. Second, he stressed in no uncertain terms that Hinduism was incomplete without Buddhism, and vice versa.

Finally, at the last meeting he proclaimed: “[I]f anybody dreams [of] the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not fight’; ‘Assimilation and not destruction’, and ‘Harmony and peace and not dissension’.

Vivekananda’s interpretation of India’s past was radical and, when he returned from the West, he had with him a large number of American and European followers. These women and men stood behind his project of establishing the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897.

Vivekananda emphasised that India needed to trade Indian spirituality for the West’s material and modern culture and was firmly behind India’s scientific modernisation. He supported Jagadish Chandra Bose’s scientific projects. In fact, Vivekananda’s American disciple Sara Bull helped patent Bose’s discoveries in the U.S. He also invited Irish teacher Margaret Noble, whom he rechristened ‘Sister Nivedita’, to help uplift the condition of Indian women. When she inaugurated a girls’ school in Calcutta, Vivekananda even requested his friends to send their girls to this school.

Vivekananda also inspired Jamsetji Tata to establish the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Iron and Steel Company. India needed a secular monastery from where scientific and technological development would uplift India’s material conditions, for which his ideals provided a source of inspiration.

Vivekananda made a remarkable impact on the makers of modern India, who later challenged the two-nation theory, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. He used the term ‘Daridra Narayan’ to imply that ‘service to the poor is service to god’, many years before Gandhiji addressed the socially oppressed as ‘Harijan’ (children of god). The Mahatma in fact opined that his love for India grew thousandfold after reading Vivekananda.

It is for these reasons that the latter’s birthday was declared as the National Youth Day.

Was Vivekananda then a proponent of Hindutva or of the millennial traditions that have survived many an invasion and endured to teach the world both “toleration and universal acceptance”? Should Hindu nationalism take his name but forget his fiery modern spirit that rediscovered and reformed India’s past? And shouldn’t India’s secular nationalism also acknowledge its deeply spiritual roots in the beliefs of pioneers like the reformer?

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