

A nation-builder, an inspiration

“Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached”, this shloka from the Upanishads popularised by Swami Vivekananda should be an inspiration to every Indian. It is particularly relevant for the youth of today to build a New India through motivation, education and dedication.

The time has never been more opportune than now for India to realise its true potential by unleashing the energies of the youth, who constitute about 65 per cent of the country's population. India is already one of the leading global IT players with the services sector contributing hugely to the country's GDP. However, for multi-sectoral growth, rapid strides need to be made in manufacturing, agriculture, energy and infrastructure so that the country becomes the third largest economy much earlier than the projected 10-15 years.

Vivekananda once told a group of journalists at the University of Michigan, “This is your century right now, but 21st century is India's century”. Sceptics might still have doubts if India can break new ground and become one of the leading economies. But the recent growth patterns show that there are many good reasons to be optimistic. The assessments by the World Bank, the IMF and other external agencies give ample indication that the country is on the right development trajectory.

However, we have to recognise some impeding factors as well. Narrow prejudices of various isms that come in the way of a socially harmonious, prosperous, peaceful, inclusive and equitable India have to be buried under the foundations of the New India.

As the Father of the Nation famously said, “India lives in its villages”. Unless those living in villages become part of a growth narrative, progress cannot be achieved. There is a need to adopt a bottom-up approach with a vision to transform villages into prosperous and self-contained economic hubs. At the same time, farmers' incomes have to be doubled by making agriculture remunerative and viable. In a bid to ensure that food security is not affected, utmost priority has to be given to farmers' welfare.

In the recent past, the public discourse is getting sidetracked by non-issues rather than issues which have a bearing on the growth and development of the country. I feel the time has come for media and cinema, the most powerful communication tools, to do some serious introspection. We need catalysts for positive change. We need voices of reason, objectivity, hope, courage and calm. In a parliamentary democracy, the people's representatives have a huge role to play in scripting the country's growth narrative. They should act as role models for others.

What Vivekananda said at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, in his epoch-making address is as relevant today as it was more than 125 years ago. He had said: “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations”.

He told the convention that, “sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilisation and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now”. Referring to the common ground of religious unity, he said “if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the other, to him I say, ‘Brother, yours is an impossible hope’.”

I have highlighted parts of Vivekananda's speeches at the World Parliament of Religions to drive home the message that religious tolerance is of paramount importance for the peaceful co-existence of people of all beliefs and faiths. Problems arise when ignorant, fanatical bigots try to impose their worldview on others and indulge in one-upmanship. Irrespective of religion, this sort of behaviour cannot be and should not be tolerated. Continuous efforts are needed to bring down caste barriers by all stakeholders, especially the political parties. Caste, cash and community must not be allowed to play any role in electoral politics and people must elect their public representatives on the basis of character, calibre, capacity and conduct.

Pointing out that caste was a social organisation and not a religious one, Vivekananda said it was the outcome of the natural evolution of our society. "It was found necessary and convenient at one time. It has served its purpose." He went on to add that the Hindu religion no longer requires the prop of the caste system.

I feel that no other country is as uniquely placed today to fast-track development as India is with a predominantly young population. Here, I would like to mention the relevance of the man-making mission spoken of by Vivekananda. He said: "Man-making is my mission of life. I am not a politician, nor I am a social reformer. It is my job to fashion man. I care only for the spirit: When that is right, everything will be righted by itself."

Vivekananda wanted education to provide "life-building, man-making and character-making assimilation of ideas". We need women and men who have knowledge, skills and attitudes that foster societal transformation. Universal literacy and good quality education with a strong underpinning of universal values are the foundations we must strengthen.

Vivekananda believed in uplift of humanity, irrespective of caste and creed and emphasised the importance of spiritualism for the survival and progress of mankind. He said "worship God in all living beings through service". This emphasis on service to humanity as a step towards spiritual upliftment needs to be underscored in our current national context.

The Swami was an enlightened spiritual preacher who brought Vedanta and Yoga to the West, while infusing a strong sense of patriotism among Indians during the colonial British rule. Through his historic speech at the Parliament of World Religions, he communicated the correct and accurate meaning of Hinduism and its way of life. He acted like a bridge between the East and the West and played a pivotal role in strengthening the spiritual foundation of mankind. I feel that his life and teachings have to be popularised so that the younger generation in particular realises and assimilates the greatness of India's culture, spiritual heritage and traditions in the context of growing materialism and influence of Western concepts and lifestyles. The younger generation should emulate his ideals.

The Swami was a great nation-builder and his teachings have become all the more relevant today in the wake of attempts by a number of fissiparous forces that impede progress. From times immemorial, Indians believed in the concept of "Sarva Dharma Sambhava" and have prayed for peace and harmony. We have upheld the principle of peaceful coexistence. It is time for us to recall and revitalise the well-springs of our rich civilisation.

Swami Vivekananda can provide our society the eternal fountain of "ananda" (happiness) springing out of "viveka" (wisdom).

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