

THE TWO HEROES OF 'SANATANA DHARMA', THEIR INSIGHTS

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Swami Vivekananda at Chicago. | Photo Credit: THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

When Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan makes a point out of Sree Narayana Guru not using the word 'Sanatana' as a prefix to 'Dharma' in the name of his organisation, the intention is to clearly distance progressive elements within Hinduism from the 'majority' who supposedly follow the casteist 'Sanatana' version. What Mr. Vijayan and other politicians do not seem to appreciate is that no Hindu reformer including Sree Narayana Guru criticised 'Sanatana Dharma' or disowned it in favour of any other religion or philosophy.

Orthodox opponents of 19th century reform movements such as Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna mission called themselves 'Sanatanists' to emphasise permanence of ancient textual doctrines over dynamism and change, as the essential feature of Hinduism. Just like the many voices that resisted change right from the time of Adi Sankara to the Bhakti movement, these self-proclaimed 'Sanatanists' also remained on the wrong side of history. What they failed to realise — like some politicians of today — is that dynamism and propensity for reform are the most 'Sanatana' or ancient or original of Hinduism's 'Dharmic' features. Which is why the reformers had no qualms in using the phrase 'Sanatana Dharma' to describe their philosophies.

In the 'Satyarth Prakasa', Swami Dayananda Saraswati called the 'Vedic Dharma', bereft of many prevailing features of Hinduism including untouchability and idol worship, 'Sanatana Nityadharma'. Few can dispute that the proud 'Sanatani', Mahatma Gandhi, had the greatest role in bringing women into the country's social mainstream. In fact, it was Gandhians such as Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta who first campaigned for reform in Hindu family laws despite facing stiff opposition, once again from self-proclaimed 'Sanatanists'. Their response was not to deride 'Sanatana Dharma'. In the Central Assembly, Renuka Ray quoted verse after verse from the Upanishads and scriptures to highlight Hinduism's egalitarianism. Any effort to carve Hinduism into progressive and regressive blocks and label the latter 'Sanatana Dharma' cannot overcome the influence and example of two icons of 'Sanatana Dharma', i.e., Swami Vivekananda and Subramania Bharati.

Before Sree Narayana Guru built his movement for emancipation of low-caste Hindus in Kerala, Swami Vivekananda called the region a 'lunatic asylum' for the kind of barbaric practices Hindus perpetrated against each other. He used every kind of critical epithet to describe the state of Hinduism and its youth. This anger and call for action arose only from his grounding in

'Sanatana Dharma'. Swami Abhedananda, Swami Vivekananda's chosen successor for his international mission, called the Chicago speech "an outline of Sanatana Dharma". He described the import of Swami Vivekananda's speech: "the word Sanatana Dharma, as you all know, means eternal religion. The eternal religion has no founder. By 'religion' we do not mean a particular set of doctrines and dogmas By religion it is not meant that we should accept some of the words written in a book (which may or may not be revealed) as infallible truth, whether the questions of minds are answered or not, but by religion is meant a solution of all the problems of life and death." It was this 'Sanatana Dharma' that formed the basis of Swami Vivekananda's attack on "Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, (which) have long possessed this beautiful earth". It is essentially different from any religion that is static by virtue of having a single source. It is different because it is antithetical to dogma.

Bharati, an indirect disciple of Swami Vivekananda through his 'Dharma-Putri' Sister Nivedita, was equally anguished by the state of material and spiritual debility to which India had sunk during his times. In a poem titled "My Heart Seethes" he writes, "Like blind children, they follow always... in this sacred land where once flourished more than a million ennobling arts, like senseless beasts, they now simply subsist." The allusion is to the path of 'Sanatana Dharma' from which Indians have gone astray. For Bharati, without spiritual awakening, there could be no political liberation. It was Nandanar and Panchali of 'Sanatana Dharma' who were inspirations in his fight against discrimination and oppression.

Vain attempts have been made to distance these icons from their 'Dharmic' background. As Sahitya Akademi awardee Ka. Naa. Subramanyam says, "communists were never tried of quoting the poem of Subramania Bharati on the Russian Revolution often forgetting or wilfully withholding the fact, that he attributed to the Mother Goddess, of India as well as of the World, in fact the Maha Kali of the Universe, the Russian Revolution..." In his quest to make 'Vedanta' practical and meaningful to the lowest rungs of society, Vivekananda did not spare even the greatest of gurus such as Sankara and Ramanuja from criticism. This does not mean he thought outside the sphere of 'Sanatana Dharma'.

Recently, on September 11, Bharati was remembered on his death anniversary and the country celebrated the 130th anniversary of the Chicago speech at the World's Parliament of Religions. These are occasions to remind ourselves that Bharati and Swami Vivekananda could espouse 'Sanatana Dharma' in a manner that appears to subvert its own established rules, only because as Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says, "Hinduism is not bound up with a creed or a book, a prophet or a founder, but is persistent search for truth on the basis of a continuously renewed experience."

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