



THE GUIDING LIGHT

The world knows him as a spiritual genius of commanding intellect and power who had spread the Vedanta philosophy and religion in America and England and then returned to India to found the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Exhorting his nation to spiritual greatness, he awakened India to a new national consciousness. Swami Vivekananda (January 12, 1863 - July 4, 1902) the principal disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, is one of the most inspiring personalities of India, who devoted his life to make India a better place to live in. To us in NANRITAM he is the guiding light. His famous words - "Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached" – resonate in our hearts as we devote ourselves to the service of the poor and the marginalized.

Swami Vivekananda is worshipped all over the world as a saint who reinvented the concept of religion before the modern world. At WORLD PARLIAMENT OF RELIGION, CHICAGO in the year 1893, Swamiji had unveiled his concept universal religion with these words – “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. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.” Further elaborating the concept, he had said – “if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being, from the lowest groveling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognise divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be created in aiding humanity to realise its own true, divine nature”

Yet, it would be wrong if we look at him only as a great spiritual force and a seeker of God; he was totally focused on the overall development of his country and wanted to harness the youth power to this cause. Early in his career After Swamiji set out on a long, extensive pilgrimage throughout India, and came to realise the abject poverty, illiteracy and degradation of human life at large. He wrote to one of his fellow ascetics – “I want some fiery young men as my disciple, both intelligent and brave, who can face death and swim across the ocean, I want both men and women of this kind...” He wanted them to develop brain and muscles together. His favourite remark was – ‘Iron nerves with an intelligent brain and the whole world is at your feet.’

Swamiji used to say that the most important teaching he received from his Master, Sri Ramakrishna was that “**Jiva is Shiva**” (each individual is divinity itself). This became his Mantra, and he coined the concept of **daridra narayana seva** – the service of God in and through (poor) human beings.

In 1897 Swamiji founded the Ramakrishna Mission - a unique organization in which monks of the Ramakrishna Order would work together with devotees for the uplift of the poor masses through social service programmes. He symbolized the new organisation with a unique seal that depicts wavy waters signifying unselfish work, the lotus that signifies the love of God, the rising sun that signifies knowledge, and the encompass serpent signifying the awakening of spiritual power. Swamiji laid down

clear tenets for the administration of the organisation. His prescription was - the youth should be encouraged to come in as part of the organization but he also laid down its structure and hierarchy - one person should lead and others follow him. To quote Swamiji - "Organisation is power and the secret of that is obedience".

Swamiji was well aware that such work will require funds and continuous support. He was also very clear about the financial proprieties that must be followed to make the organization strong and effective. His instructions were - "Never mix up different heads of accounts and be transparent in your accounting. Once the society is on its feet, start a small magazine as its mouthpiece. Ask your friends to get subscribers". He even advised that the cover of the first issue must be attractive; it must be interesting enough to make people participate in the works of the organisation. This shows how careful he was even on the minutest detail and nothing escaped his attention.

In his mind, Swam Vivekananda had a clear blueprint of what he wanted. The first quality he looked in his followers, he said - "I want them educated" and to him "the ideal of all education should be man-making." He also felt that education should give importance to three Hs - Head, Hand and Heart. His famous observation - 'playing football is more important than reading the Gita' had shaken many of his contemporaries to pay attention to healthcare and team work as their first step towards social service. His idea of education included religion, nationalism, study of history, art and science. He wanted the educated youth to create awareness among the masses against exploitation and superstitions and to serve the poor and the downtrodden by offering support where they were most vulnerable. He called upon the youth to regularly visit hamlets and villages and tell people about the importance of education. If the poor cannot go to school, he said, the school should come to the poor.

This is, in a nutshell, how Swamiji looked at the youth of India and how he expected the youth to devote themselves to nation building activities. In a short life-span of less than forty years, he had set up the Ramakrishna Order and had given a new face to the ancient religion. This is why even after one and a half century, he is still considered a youth icon and why his life and message inspired all nationalist leaders from Sri Aurobindo to Netaji Subhash Chandra. We at NANRITAM try to follow the ideal that Swamiji had laid down for creating a social service organization - "Service to man is service to God".

