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SWAMI DAYANAND SARASWATI

F.No. 452

To countless millions of our countrymen, the name of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, nee Dayaram Mulshankar or "Mulji", occupies the same place as Mahatma Gandhi does in the history of modern India. His life and his life's work formed the inspiration behind a very large part of the concept and framework of free India -- one that came into being almost seven decades after his death.

Much has been said and written about Swamiji in the past century and much more will be forthcoming during his centenary year. I am adding to this not merely as a life-long, devout believer in his teachings, but also because of an ever-growing urgency. Swamiji's vision of a resurgent, free, united and dynamic India, which was a model for the founding fathers of our republic, has faded away within three decades of its birth. It is my firm belief that now, more than ever, we must look back at Swamiji's legacy to understand why and where we went wrong.

Prominent among Swamiji's many-faceted achievements was his gift of a cultural and organisational basis to our nationalist aspirations. This was because Swamiji's boundless energy and sharp intellect were directed not in the search of individual moksha (salvation) but totally towards the physical, moral, material and religious upliftment of his fellow men.

Of the long line of saints and reformers, he was the first to throw the doors of ^{Hinduism} Vedic Dharama wide open for ^{all non-} ~~these~~ Hindus, ~~to whom they were closed hitherto.~~ His presence and his preachings ended the days when a Hindu felt ashamed of his religion and many sought solace in Christianity or Islam. Cutting through the later-day perversions and distortions in Hinduism as it was practised, he gave the resounding slogan -- "Back to the Vedas". This was the bedrock of all his religious and social reforms. The Veda being the wisdom of God, is Svatach-pramana (Having its full logical justification within itself) and is therefore the touchstone of all birth or life. With this truth,

he went on to pronounce a severe indictment of contemporary Hinduism. A large part of his Satyarth Prakash is a critique of Hinduism dealing with caste based on birth, idol worship, miracles, pilgrimages, exploiting priests, holymen, rituals, sects, etc. In it all, he had only two basic criteria for judgement : "the sword of logic and the touchstone of morality". Summarized in a couple of pages entitled "Aryavata is Full Of Darkness", his harsh criticism hits out at the innumerable rituals and social practices of Hinduism declaring as worthless the vast complex of idol and temple worship, pilgrimages, sectarian and superstitious rites attached to these.

He bitterly denounced the caste system with its countless taboos and privileges and exposed its mal-practices in private and public life. By acknowledging merit alone as the criteria of superiority (Brahminhood) and not birth, he sought to solve the problem of social inequality which had been the cause of our repeated political subjugations and is even today, when we have enshrined his beliefs into our Constitution, eating into the very vitals of our nation's life.

In his view of the ~~ideal~~ ideal society, the Varna classification by qualities and merit must replace demarcation into castes determined by birth. The allocation of Varna should be made by the ~~state~~ state, after due examination of the graduates from schools.

Along with demolition of the caste system based on the concept of high and low by birth, he laid maximum emphasis on education. In fact he devoted the entire second and third chapters of the Satyarth Prakash to the subject. His herculean efforts in the direction of educational reforms by far out-distanced his time. He revised the long forgotten ideal of gurukul, where the children of high and low may pursue their studies on equal footing, away from the corrupting influences of town life and blessed by the loving personal touch of the teacher.

In a plea for the compulsory education of all four classes (including the Shudras who must also be taught the vedas like everyone else) of men and women, he warned that untill all were educated there was no hope for prosperity and happiness in the country. A pioneer in the field of equal education for women, he specifically believed that even the happiness of a married life depended on both husband and wife being educated.

He championed the cause of women and espoused for her equal rights with man. Here again, he was far ahead of his times. He propogated monogamy for men and was against a girl marrying before she was at least 15 years old. In fact he felt it was better if a girl remained in her father's home than married to a worthless man. He was against marriage without full and prior consent of both partners. He repeatedly stressed that the firm foundation of a happy home was mutual affection and shared responsibilities. He reminded his followers to remember the Golden Vedic Agra Age when women fully participated in all areas of public life.

Swamiji was amongst the very first to recognise, with the eye of a seer, in Hindi the future lingua franca of India. Hindi had never been an elitist or court language. Yet it was the spoken language of an overwhelming majority of ordinary Indians and he correctly forsaw that it could be the only language which could replace English in a free and united India. Hailing as he did from the princely state of Morvi in Gujarat, his mother tongue was Gujarati but he taught himself Hindi and later on insisted on writing his magnum opus in that language. And this was inspite of the fact that Sanskrit was the medium through which he received most of his formal education. In fact, another sign of his genius was the vast improvement in his written Hindi as can be seen from his early pamphlets as compared to the highly sanskritised Hindi in a clear and fluent style in which he completed his last work, Ved Bhashya.

He gave the learning of Hindi a primary place in all education. A small example of this coupled with his deep-rooted swadeshi character is illustrated by his advice to the Maharajah of Jodhpur on the crown Prince's education. Besides other issues

he specifically wrote to say that the prince should be taught Sanskrit and Hindi first and English only afterwards.

In many ways, the most vital aspect of the Swamiji's life was the strong protest he lodged against the prevailing belief that this world is an evil thing to be shunned, and against the indifference towards society while seeking moksha (salvation) for one's own self. He pointed out this passive acceptance of life, this individualistic tendency, coupled with caste was the real cause of the degeneration of our society. In fact, Swamiji was a man of action, of morality concerned with the present and the future out of a deep understanding of the richness of the ancient past. It has been said of him that he waded through knowledge to achieve sainthood.

His life and its quality, both on a small personal level as well as the vast historical perspective, show his true mettle. Although we call him Maharishi, he disclaimed even the rishi's title in his life time. Although ten decades later no one can doubt his prophecies, he vehemently disclaimed the description of a prophet. Although some over-enthusiastic followers ascribed to him a new truth or religion, he in his life time never failed to remind them on every occasion that he was merely preaching the truth, enshrined in the most ancient of literatures -- the Veras. While dogmatists today argue over the imfallibility of his spoken or written word, he himself specifically gave liberty of thought and of development to his followers as any reader of the rules of the Arya Samaj will find for himself. Yet, in a society opposed to these virtues he was a fighter of epic proportions. There was no yielding in his character -- no expediency or sycophancy or compromises -- in life and with his beliefs. Above all, for the great Hindu reformer that he was, his life and his teachings portray the true secularism of our ancient civilisation.

When he criticised, the sharp blade of his logic cutting across all human prejudices touched the entire human race -- Hindus, Christians, Muslims, et al. He criticised and battled against principles and never personalities. It is not surprising, therefore, that prominent men of other religions often invited Swamiji to deliver sermons in their places of worship. His deep personal friendships with leaders of other religions ^{were} ~~was~~ legion.

In fact Swamiji himself was fond of repeating the parable about an assembly of a thousand faiths. A king searching for the true religion asks each preacher representing his faith at the assembly what their religion consists of. He gets a thousand contradictory replies and decides none is worthy because there are 999 witnesses to the falsehood of each. A real sage then asked the king to find out the basic points on which they all agreed. These were truth, knowledge and a moral life. That, said the sage, is the only true religion.

I elaborate on this common knowledge about Swamiji for a simple reason. I want to prod the reader to look at Swamiji's life and see how far adrift we have become. Of all the points I have enumerated earlier, have we been able to achieve any one of them ?

Have we been able to banish the debilitating caste factor from our life ? Do we accord women an equal status in our lives ? Do we act against social injustices and not accept them as an evil necessity of an unreal world ? Have we made equal education a birth right of all children rather than on the basis of caste and class ?

In this connection, I am reminded of the mess we have made of Hindi as our lingua franca or official language at the national level. Nothing will illustrate the sorry state of affairs today than the following.

In 1837 the Indian Government had declared that the official language in the United Provinces would be Urdu written in the Persian script. During the 1860s a movement had gradually built up in favour of replacing it by Hindi in Devanagari script. The

reasons were simple then as they are today. However, when Urdu was replaced by Hindi as the official language of Bihar in 1881, it gave an impetus to the movement in Uttar Pradesh. Soon Swamiji had thrown the weight of his influence behind the movement in support of Hindi. As a result of his tireless efforts, about 29 memorials were submitted by the Arya Samaj to the Government in this regard. Swamiji's support for Hindi was based on his recognition of the vital necessity of a unifying language. The decisiveness with which he adhered to his principles and beliefs, can be seen from the way he persistently refused to have his major writings translated into English, Urdu and other Indian languages because that would discourage the learning of Hindi. In fact, often, when questioned as to when India would become great, he would reply, "when there is unity of dharma, language and objectives."

Yet today not only are we still dithering over the question of having Hindi as our lingua franca, but we are stepping backwards into powerful lingual chauvinism.

It is in such gloomy surroundings that the example of Swamiji stands ^{out} as a firm beacon showing the way for those who care to see it and have courage of conviction required to follow it.

Laxman Singh
27.12.82

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