Preface

Swami Vivekananda died in 1902 at the early age of thirty-nine, but by then his work had been done. Though he kept aloof from politics, he has been hailed as the first great exponent of Indian nationalism. Where Vivekananda had sown, Gandhiji and Netaji reaped. If the final achievement fell far short of expectation, it was because India’s leaders had not read Vivekananda aright. Swamiji looked upon himself as a religious teacher; many of his disciples and admirers think that it was as the saviour of Hinduism that he contributed to the awakening of India and paved the way to the country’s independence. This is a misleading tribute, because the religion Vivekananda preached drew upon Islam as well as Hinduism, and he was also an admirer as well as a critic of Christianity and of Buddhism. It is said that he had awakened the soul of India, but this awakening was made easier by his earlier and somewhat different awakening of the soul of the West.

Vivekananda’s commanding presence and his powerful, mellifluous voice might have held his first audiences in thrall, but generations who have not seen his face or heard his voice are as impressed by his teachings as those who came in contact with him. Although primarily a religious teacher and a missionary and also a convinced monist, he founded no sect. That is why he could easily become the prophet of nationalism in a country riven by warring castes and creeds. How is it that this monk, who called himself a Vedantist, could preach a religion that would fire young people with patriotic zeal, prepare them for a crusade against poverty and ignorance and instil into his disciples and followers an absorbing passion for work that goes hand in hand with supreme non-attachment?

I have read many works of exegesis on Swamiji’s teachings, but have not felt satisfied because of their one-sidedness. Rationalists and pragmatists have praised him for his humanism, but have been puzzled by what they mistakenly call his ‘mysticism’ or ‘idealism’. At the other end are religious thinkers who look upon him as a descendant of Shankaracharya, who
elucidated Vedantic monism; yet another group in this category look upon him as a teacher who tried to make a synthesis of all religions, thus missing the edge and thrust of his preaching. Incidentally, it is this last-named group of admirers who look upon Vivekananda as a forerunner of Gandhiji, but I want to emphasize the basic difference in their beliefs and attitudes.

My own approach to Vivekananda also is confessedly one-sided. In 1982 I brought out a book on the Independence struggle and named it India Wrists Freedom. Friends who liked the book pressed me to write a monograph on the fountainhead of Indian nationalism—Swami Vivekananda. As I addressed myself to this task, I realized that if Swamiji is to be understood properly, we must probe the central philosophy from which all his teachings emanate and flow out in different directions. Indeed it is this philosophy, deep and closely argued, which runs like a thread through his lectures, essays and letters, and it is this philosophy which accounts for the refreshing contemporaneity of his teachings. Though circumstances and situations may change, this philosophy will endure, because it deals with the socio-economic problems of man as much as his spiritual cravings.

I am grateful to friends who have offered valuable suggestions and helped me with books not only on Swami Vivekananda but also on the nationalist movement as inspired and sustained by his teachings. For Vivekananda’s works I have used the Centenary edition published from Almora; and whether using quotation marks or not, I have tried to explain him in his own words as far as possible. Swami Lokeswarananda of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, obliged me by reading over the entire typescript, suggesting corrections wherever I seemed to go astray and drawing attention to inadequacies in my exposition. I am grateful to Professor Michael Balfour for verifying the quotation from Marx’s letter to Hyndman (The Record of an Adventurous Life, 1911), and, last and first, to my former pupil Shankar (now Swami Poornatmananda), who has helped me with books and was with me at every stage of writing and typing the work.

While acknowledging my indebtedness to these friends, I must say that the opinions expressed in the book from the
first chapter to the last are all my own, born of my sundry studies and experiences, 'in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness', but which also fills me with undying hopes for the future.

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