

Culture

Swami Vivekananda – a Great Indian Thinker of the 19th Century

By Naoyuki Haraoka



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Introduction

One beautifully sunny Saturday afternoon in Tokyo in June, an event was held at the Indian Embassy to mark 161st anniversary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda and the 131st anniversary of his visit to Japan. It consisted of two parts: an opening ceremony with inaugural addresses given by Indian Ambassador Sibi George and Akie Abe, widow of late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and a seminar on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda with a number of distinguished scholars and experts. Traditional Indian dances and songs between the two parts helped to inspire the audience's interest in Indian philosophy and religion as symbolized in the music and words.

Mrs. Abe talked about her late husband's friendship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and her special gratitude to the Indian Embassy for its warm consideration for her on the occasion of the tragedy in 2022. This reminded us of the two leaders' personal friendship being a source of good India-Japan relations. Swami Vivekananda is a good person to remind us of the importance of friendship and that the current divisions we see in many places around the world today need to be resolved as quickly as possible.

Who Is Swami Vivekananda?

Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu monk of the 19th century who encouraged Indian nationalism in the colonial age and also promoted social reform of Indian society. As a man with a good Western education, he told Europeans and Americans about the essence of Hinduism as a universal religion that could achieve unity and friendship among all races and religious groups.

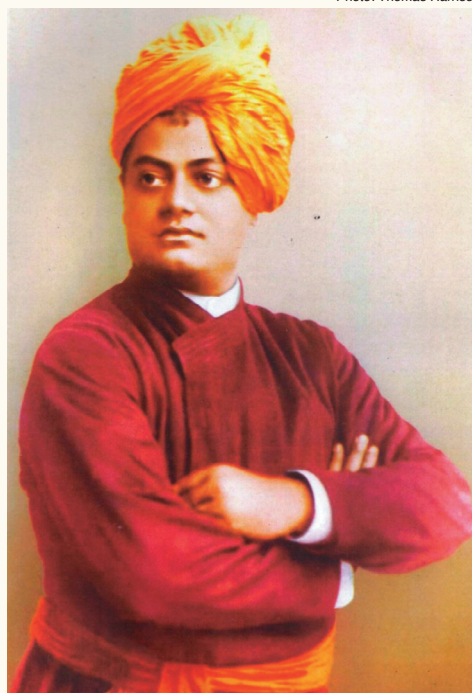
His understanding of Western culture and society, and his insights into and affection for Indian culture, enabled him to be a communicator and mediator between the two. He was respected not only by Indians as a reformer of Indian civilization like the poet Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, but also by Western intellectuals like Romain Rolland. As a communicator between East and West, he traveled long distances, not only in India but also in the United States and Europe, and in

Japan too. He stopped by Japan in 1893 on his way to Chicago to attend the World Parliament of Religions, and visited Nagasaki, Kobe, Osaka, Kyoto, Yokohama and Tokyo at that time. "In my opinion, if all our rich and educated men once go and see Japan, their eyes will be opened," he said.

Japan SPOTLIGHT has already published articles about him in past issues by our editorial board members Mohan Gopal and Mukesh Williams. I would like to mention here what drew my attention in his biography.

First, he was born in Calcutta into an intellectual family. His father was a lawyer who spoke Persian and English and his mother was also very intelligent and had excellent English language skills. Both of them were greatly loved and respected by their neighbors and all kinds of people who knew them. This family background was

Photo: Thomas Harrison



Swami Vivekananda 1893

important to him when he spoke about his achievements later in life, as he knew how benevolence is important for human happiness.

But he was also a very mischievous child, and his mother was occasionally at a loss how to discipline him. But he never fell into evil conduct and in later life this mischievous nature was a source of the outspokenness and humor that attracted many people to him. He became a man of great sympathy – an important step in becoming a good communicator. Moreover, he was not like some men of religion who reek of hypocrisy. He was more practical and thus he talked about India as a nation in need of poverty mitigation first and not religion.

Second, he was very active in international missions. Well-educated in English, he was very open-minded to any culture and did not mind traveling far to almost anywhere in the world. This was unusual for his contemporaries in the last quarter of the 19th century when there were no airplanes available. This open-mindedness eventually brought him to view the world as being unified, somewhat unique in his age, and our politically and economically divided world today could learn from his perspective.

Third, he died very young in 1902 at the age of 39. Death at a young age normally seems tragic, but in his case his portrait seems to enhance the effects of his words today in encouraging young people to develop their careers and contribute to society.

I think these three characteristics of his short life are closely related to his legacy.

His Legacy to the World

Swami Vivekananda was well educated in Western culture and spoke excellent English, but inherited from his benevolent Indian parents a deep knowledge of traditional Indian literature. He was above all a well-disciplined Hindu monk, and he eventually came to believe that Indians should learn about social equality from the West and the West should learn about spiritual generosity from India. He stated at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago that Hinduism is a religion with a message of tolerance accepting all kinds of people and is thus a universal religion that helps people to become aware of the holy spirit inside themselves.

So what did he think about the Indian caste system and class discrimination originally inherent in Hinduism? He said that in religion there should be no class discrimination and that caste in India merely showed a social division of labor; but he criticized caste based on upbringing or family background as was then prevalent in India as a deterioration from the original idea of caste in Indian society. His idea of a universal religion embracing all religions and considering all kinds of people as equal is a useful counterpoint to current global divisions between democracy and authoritarianism, or Christianity and Islam, or the wealthy and the poor. In his theory, the diversity of cultures, religions and philosophies should be accepted just as it is.

What we should not forget about his achievements is that he was also working hard for social services such as construction of hospitals, management of schools, and publications. Hindu

nationalism was certainly provoked by his advocacy for Hinduism as a universal religion, but at the same time he recognized the many positive aspects of Western civilization, such as the highly educated women in Western society.

His readiness to accept the positive aspects of other countries' civilizations was also seen in his visit to Japan in 1893. His observations about Japan and the Japanese were summarized in an interview with a Chennai newspaper in February 1897:

1. The Japanese have a strong faith in and affection for their nation and they even sacrifice everything for the nation.
2. Japanese art is authentic.
3. Their Buddhism is similar to Vedanta, an ancient Indian philosophy, atheistic and affirmative to humans.
4. While absorbing Western knowledge in depth, the Japanese try to maintain their own spirituality.
5. The Japanese eat an appropriate amount of rice and miso soup.
6. It is better for young Indians to study in Japan rather than in the United Kingdom.

His Legacy for Young People Today

He also emphasized the need for physical and mental training to strengthen body and soul.

He said, "If there were sin in this world, it would be frailty. You must refuse anything that makes you frail physically, intellectually and spiritually, as it cannot be truth." Among his other sayings are:

"You can achieve anything great with foresight, infinite energy, infinite passion, infinite boldness and infinite patience."

"With responsibility given to them, the weak would be stronger and the ignorant would have wisdom."

"You have everything within yourself and you can do anything in this space, and so do not lose your confidence."

In particular, he mentioned "failure in your life" as part of the meaning of life, and that a beautiful life must be achieved by failures and that they should not be matters for concern. This is good advice for young entrepreneurs, and these words have been encouraging for many young Indian people in developing their lives and careers. The ambassador himself mentioned that he was also encouraged by these remarks when he was a student. The image of Swami Vivekananda in his portrait must have had a strong impact on the young.

Above all, Swami Vivekananda emphasized altruism as the essential meaning of human life and not egoism. This encourages social entrepreneurship, which could lead to the blossoming of new businesses pursuing social reform, such as green businesses or caregiving businesses. Young Japanese people could be also encouraged by these words and regain their confidence. For while, as Swami Vivekananda said, there would be many things for Indians to learn from Japan, there must be many for Japanese to learn from India.

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