



By AMITA KANEKAR

On the Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's Famous Speech

The Goan and Indian media recently marked the 125th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's celebrated speech, made in Chicago to the 'World's Parliament of Religions'. Now, 125 years is an odd anniversary to commemorate, but then this was no ordinary speech. It was a speech that made Vivekananda a hugely popular figure across the country – as seen by the hundreds of streets named after him – is still celebrated in school textbooks, and seen as something for all Indians to be proud of, even though it was not about India but about the Hindu religion. The fact that Vivekananda visited Goa just before making this speech has evoked some excitement here too, given the strong likelihood that the visit contributed to his ideas.

But there is no agreement on what these ideas are. Was Swami Vivekananda a secular and anti-casteist liberal, as liberal Hindus across India believe? Or one of the original Hindutwavadis, as the Hindutva camp does? And why does it even matter today, 125 years later?

The first question is relatively easy to answer, since Vivekananda's many speeches and writings are freely available online. He speaks of the need for the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and such 'gems of spirituality' to be freed from 'the possession of a few' and taught in every village of India, and declares the Hindu religion as the best in the world. He criticizes Hindus as weak, pacifist, and 'a nation of women', and advocates mass spiritual education as well as physical training as a solution. He says that all religions were one, but also claims that Hindus had lived in terror under Muslim rulers. He criticizes the caste system, even blames it for conversions to Islam and Christianity, but also claims that it had been originally great, that he was himself descended from the 'purest of Kshatriyas', and that civilization could not survive without caste. He calls Brahmins the 'ideal of humanity in India', and criticizes the non-Brahmin castes for 'fighting the Brahmin' instead of emulating their culture and spirituality.

Now, it is important to remember that 19th century British India was indeed a time of 'fighting the Brahmin'. It was a time of widespread Bahujan awakening against caste, thanks to the

work of Bahujan intellectuals like Jyotirao and Savitri Phule, Iyothee Thas, Ayyankali, and others, as well as the opportunities provided by British rule. The response of the savarnas was Brahmanical reform, revivalism and 'shudhi', led by savarna reformists like Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Swami Dayanand Saraswati, in which the so-called Shudras and Ati-shudras began to be included as 'Hindus'. The purpose of this was to increase Hindu numbers in the new era of censuses and electoral politics, and also to stop conversions to (and increase in numbers in) Islam and Christianity (Maria Mishra, 2008). The savarnas realized that they would have to fight against some aspects of caste themselves, in order to preserve their caste dominance.

Vivekananda's vision was thus one with the other savarna reformists - of a once-glorious and Brahmin-dominated caste society, which had got corrupted and oppressed by Islam, but needed to be restored. As G. Aloysius (1998) points out, it was a vision at loggerheads with the 19th-century anti-caste movements which were fighting for social, economic and political rights.

His Chicago speech, however, went one step further. He did not just glorify the Hindu religion as the 'mother of all religions' - as other British Indian speakers also did - he likened it to modern science. The conclusions of modern science were to be found in the Vedas and Upanishads, he said, and 'the Hindu is only glad, that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language, and with further light from the latest conclusions of science...' ('Paper on Hinduism', presented at The Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893).

Meera Nanda (2004) calls this an early example of post-modernist philosophy, and also the beginning of 'Vedic Science' - the idea that the Vedas were based in modern science. Thus started the trend of glorifying the Brahmanical tradition as scientific and progressive, which also means ignoring the oppression and ignorance it fostered, besides also distorting the meaning of science. From here to hailing ancient airplanes and organ transplants is one small step. From there to setting up university departments of astrology is hardly a step at all. Meanwhile, the actual indigenous scientific traditions of South Asia, like those found in the Lokayata and Buddhist movements in ancient times, or in the productive culture of the Adivasi, Dalit and Shudra communities, or with modernists like Phule, Thas, Periyar and Ambedkar, were ignored.



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This vision of Vivekananda contributed hugely to the cultural nationalism that infused the anti-colonial movement, and would be a foundational idea for the post-1947 nation of India. Instead of seeing the new State as the site of new political equalities, liberties and fraternities, many of its savarna leaders saw it as the rebirth of a glorious, ancient, and progressive Brahmanical culture. And this celebration of the Brahminism of the past became a validation of the Brahminism of the present. Thus you have a country which sends rockets into outer space - rockets with Sanskrit names - but still cannot provide mass primary education; a country which talks of age-old tolerance and ahimsa, while systemic violence, whether by the State or the mob or the family, is the order of the day all over; a country which claims to be a science superpower but cannot implement its own law banning manual cleaning of human shit, even though this casteist genocide take the life of one person (belonging to the caste that is traditionally expected to clean shit) every 5 days.

The liberal Hindus and non-Hindus - in Goa and outside - who today abhor the politics of the BJP-RSS, refuse to recognize that the latter has its roots in Indian nationalism. It was this wind of religious and cultural nationalism sown more than a century ago - and fostered by the Congress - which has given us the Hindutva whirlwind of today.

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