

Swami Vivekananda – The benefactor of the masses

In a letter to Alasinga Perumal, Swami Vivekananda wrote “I do not believe in a God or Religion that does not bring a piece of bread to the orphan’s mouth or wipe away the widow’s tears.” (Vivekananda, Epistles (First Series), 1989, p. 50) In another place he says, “Half a loaf of bread is better than no bread at all.” (Vivekananda, Epistles (Second Series), 1989, p. 381) Such strong statements reflect his constant concern for the common man and his vision of a religion that is at once practical and provides the individual with the inspiration to know and seek God. It also shows the socialist side of his nature. Swami Vivekananda was deeply troubled by the inequities that prevailed in Indian Society. In his letter to the Maharaja of Mysore in June 1984 he wrote, “The one thing that is at the root of all evils in India is the condition of the poor....The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. That is the great task between our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction. Priest-power and foreign conquest have trodden them down for centuries, and at last the poor of India have forgotten that they are human beings.” (Vivekananda, Writings: Prose and Poems, 1989) He just could not accept the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor was something that could not be bridged.

In another letter to Alasinga Perumal he writes, “And, oh, how my heart ached to think of what we think of the poor, the low, in India. They have no chance, no escape, and no way to climb up. The poor, the low, the sinner in India, have no friends, no help – they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they

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feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes. They have forgotten they too are men. And the result is slavery.” (Vivekananda, Epistles, 1989, p. 14) India of today is not very different from what it was then. Today the top 20% of Indians generate and control 85% of India’s wealth, while the bottom 20% for whom Swamiji’s heart bled, generate and control a mere 1.5% of India’s wealth. What is it that Government or Society can do to reduce such gross inequities? Is mere charity a solution or should we look at this issue with more depth and explore more empowering options of bringing in equity?

Swami Vivekananda believed in raising the poor and ignorant masses not through mere doles, but wanted them to be empowered and made capable of building their own destinies. All that he wanted the ‘haves’ in society to do were to create an enabling and facilitatory environment wherein the poor could raise themselves up without affecting their self-esteem and dignity. He was not only sensitive to the economic disparities but was deeply pained by the social inequities that were prevailing. He once remarked, “I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. They are practically our slaves. If we want to regenerate India, we must work for them. Our mission is for the destitute, the poor, and the illiterate peasantry and labouring classes, and if after everything has been done for them first, there is spare time, then only for

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the gentry. Those peasants and labouring people will be won over by love.....”
(Vivekananda, Interviews, 1989, pp. 222,223) He strongly believed that equity had to be brought not by bringing down the rich but by pushing up the poor. This is so very relevant in today’s India. We now have a country wherein more than 200 districts are affected by violence, and people are adopting the ideology of bringing in social equity from the barrel of a gun. Swamiji often remarked that social rising up in India should happen not by a *‘revolution’* but by *‘evolution’*. What foresight he had? He understood that people would not sit and tolerate this inequity for too long. They would get restless and take to addressing this problem from an emotive plane rather than from a rational one. An agitated and restless group of people can be easily motivated to take to violence with disastrous consequences. At the same time, Swamiji also understood that a country could not truly grow and thrive till the benefits of economic prosperity reached out to the last man on the street. He also understood that mere charity could be very demeaning and take away human enterprise and initiative. This would also not be a sustainable and permanent way of solving this problem. He insightfully urged people to see religion as a means of serving the less fortunate without snatching away their sense of pride, dignity, and self-esteem. His mantra of *‘Daridra devo bhava, Moorkha devo bhava’* lends credence to this thinking. He wanted this kind of assistance to be ‘life giving’ and ‘enabling’. He wanted to make sure that the masses would once and for all be raised and would not have to depend either on a benevolent government or on a philanthropic society. This practical and non-violent way forward would neither create insecurity in the minds of the wealthy nor any negative emotion in the people

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trying to climb up the economic ladder. What India needs today is leaders and planners who can think and act like Swami Vivekananda. Otherwise, the rapid growth that we see today will continue to rest in the hands of a chosen few. And this could only strengthen the hands of those who ideologically believe that a violent snatching away from the rich is the only way to provide for the poor.

And very strategically, Swami Vivekananda understood that it is the Youth of India who could possibly 'gird up their loins' (Vivekananda, Epistles (Third Series), 1989, p. 504) and 'put themselves to work'. He mentioned repeatedly, "My faith is in the younger generation" (Vivekananda, Interviews, 1989, p. 223). His clarion call to the youth was to focus their collective energies towards Nation Building. For Youth is that wonderful time in life when energy is limitless, human creativity is at its best and the 'never say die' spirit is at its peak. Today, as you look around, one keeps seeing and reading about the achievements of hundreds of young persons in practically all spheres of life. Demographically, the India of today is at its youngest best. Nearly 78% of our country's population is less than 40 years old. Imagine the potential energy in these millions of young Indians and you can then fathom the fact that we could face any challenge as a Nation. Youth is also an impressionable age wherein we try and model our life against that of a 'role model' or 'icon'. This is the time when one is ready to take on tasks however onerous they are; the time when our ideals can drive and determine one's actions; the time when we believe that we can do anything under the sun. This is the time when we are easily motivated by the environment and by what we see and

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value around us. Swamiji and his message for the youth to involve themselves in the upliftment of the masses is possibly the most relevant today. On one hand, one sees such enormous prosperity and wealth while on the other hand 1/3rd of Indians go without a second meal every day. While India's scientific achievements in the field of telecommunication, information technology and space is enviable, it makes one's heart bleed when you know that only around 20% of rural Indians have sanitation facilities and 30% of them are able to get safe, potable water to drink. Even today nearly 42% of our children in the villages find it difficult to access schooling while many children are still labouring away in the fields and factories to make their family's ends meet. While we are able to find solutions to all kinds of technical and software problems all over the world, we still are grappling with having nearly 25% of the world's poor in our country. While we are finding more young achievers in the field of sports, music, arts, technology and wealth creation, we find very few young people leading us in the political and social arenas. Finding solutions to the complex social, economic, infrastructural, political, and poverty-related problems is indeed a great challenge. This challenge needs enormous energy, a fresh new perspective, a grandiose vision, and superhuman effort. While on the one hand, we could safely say that our youth has the ability to meet and face up to these challenges, we also need to accept the difficult fact that this is not high on the list of their priorities. How do we get our young whose role models and icons today are mostly from the economic, technology, music, cinema and sports arenas to consider **'Nation building and raising the masses'** as an important facet of their productive lives? How do we get them to address the myriad problems facing us? While there is no one

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correct way to do this, I feel that we need to begin by understanding our youth and the environment in which we live presently.

India has always idolized its icons and has made their character into a national phenomenon. During the early Vedic times, knowledge was all-important and hence we placed our Rishis and hermits on the highest pedestal. Even kings would pay obeisance to them. We have a person like Vishwamitra who was a King but whose ideal was to become a 'Rajarishi'. Then came the phase wherein we began placing human valour higher than knowledge. This was the period of the Mahabharata, where the Kshatriya and his valour were worth emulating. We have examples from Karna to Ekalavya, a tribal in the forests hankering after knowledge of weaponry. We also have Brahmins like Dronacharya and Kripacharya, whose traditional pursuit was 'knowledge', becoming teachers and trainers of warriors. Gradually this value of 'Valour' changed with the times to that of 'Nationalism and patriotism'. This was the period of the British rule where every young man considered it a sacred duty to lay down his life for the motherland. From Bhagat Singh, to Subhas Chandra Bose to Gandhi, the burning fire in every young one's belly was to free this great motherland of ours from the slavery of the British. Today, the post independent India has a value system different from that of the past. Despite calling ourselves a 'knowledge-based' society, we have placed people making millions out of this 'knowledge' on a high pedestal and consider 'money-making' to be our single-minded aim. The tragedy is that while we do have a few icons worth emulating in making money, we have hundreds of others whose means do not justify

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their end. Today while the value of ‘creating wealth’ by itself is not demeaning or base, the way it is created is what my concern is. When your only ‘value’ is making money and not how you make it, what becomes the first casualty in society are our ‘VALUES’. We are having a dangerous environment today wherein our youth are increasingly being carried away by the attractions of crass consumerism and commercialization of human existence and they consider their life a success only if they ‘belong’ to this tribe of human achievers who are measuring their lives by how many millions they have made in the shortest possible time. The ‘how’ of making it has slipped the attention of many of them? Motivating them against this backdrop to consider the prospect of becoming a **‘Social Entrepreneur’** working for the thousands of deprived and disadvantaged fellow Indians is indeed more than a challenge. The key to the problem lies in making our young understand that the real benefits of today’s material advances lies not just in ‘creating wealth’ but ensuring that we use it make our society more egalitarian, more equitable and more socially and economically just. The more one thinks of this, the more one is convinced that the answer lies in the clarion call that Swami Vivekananda gave the young of this country more than a hundred years ago. His powerful statement, “I call every man a traitor who having been educated at people’s expense pays not the least heed to them” (Vivekananda, Epistles (Fourth Series), 1989, p. 329) is reflective of the obligatory responsibility of our educated youth in taking to working for the amelioration of the suffering of our toiling masses.

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Swamiji also addressed the issue by simplifying the whole issue of human existence and giving a new perspective to this kind of work. He made National reconstruction with the ideals of '*Tyaga*' and '*Seva*' (Vivekananda, Interviews, 1989, p. 228) the most important purpose of living. To the more discerning, he made this way of life a '*spiritual pursuit*'. The transience of human achievement and the impermanence of material wealth were of critical consideration to this thinking. What he attempted to do was to show us a higher reason to live, a higher ideal to live for, and a higher state to reach within the limitations and boundaries of a human existence. He has, in very simple terms given the youth a higher ideal to strive for and in this striving he found answers to the material problems of the suffering millions.

Amongst the many inspirational writings of his, one that conveys how one can begin to engage in the action of serving the masses was his call to focus on the 3 'H's. The first 'H' that he writes about is the 'Heart' to feel. He wanted everyone to *feel for the poor, the downtrodden and the marginalized* (Vivekananda, Interviews, 1989, p. 367). He wanted us to feel till our head reeled and our hearts stopped (Vivekananda, Interviews, 1989, p. 367). Only with the power of emotion driving us, can one inspire oneself or others to think beyond the ordinary mundane existence. In doing so, he had assured us that an indomitable power would come to us and we will be able to throw away all our concerns for ourselves and place ourselves as servants of society and use our inner energy and will to transcend the problems of our human brethren.

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The pragmatic man that Swami Vivekananda was; he also understood that an emotional reaction in isolation has its own limitations, and wanted one to go beyond and bring in the thinking that is required for appropriate action. Finding solutions to the complex social, economic, infrastructural, political and poverty-related problems that the Indian masses face today can appear insurmountable. Our response to solve these issues cannot be emotional. We need to think through, strategize and then arrive at a workable, well thought-out solution. Swamiji called this cognitive phase as the second 'H' – the 'Head' to think.

Merely feeling for the poor and thinking through a solution can by itself be a inconclusive exercise. One needs to be able to implement the plans and strategies that we conceive of. This is the third 'H' that Swamiji wrote about. We need the 'Hands' to work too. We need to convert our emotions into concrete strategies and have the discipline and willingness to apply ourselves to the task of translating them into pragmatic action. Only then can we help in realizing Swami Vivekananda's dreams for India.

An illustration of this could be seen in the recent anti-corruption movement that we saw in India. The youth of this country responded to the issue emotionally and joined in the thousands to protest against corruption. If only, they had spent some time in thinking through the problem, strategizing a solution framework and then implementing it, we could have possibly made a better impact. The heart and hands were surely there, but a head in-between would have made a huge difference.

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Upliftment of the masses can also appear abstract and very overwhelming. It can make one believe that one needs to be specially competent to address this vexatious issue. This could lead to the question, 'Whether one needs to have a formal qualification as part of this preparation?' Does one have some form of training before one gets absorbed into working with the masses? One can feel that one needs to be either a doctor or a teacher or a professional social worker before one can get involved in the service of others. While qualifications and training do add to the competence of people engaged in this kind of work, I would like to mention the qualities that Swami Vivekananda saw as a basic requirement of people wanting to work for others. He felt that unless one knew how to swim, one should not attempt to jump into the ocean. One can see many people begin to engage in social service activities with a lot of enthusiasm, only to crumble at the first sign of a problem. Swamiji has said "Purity, Patience and Perseverance are three qualities that every social worker needs to have" (Vivekananda, Epistles (Second Series), 1989, p. 281). This is not only extremely relevant but a very practical guideline. In a world filled with corruption and negativism, **purity** in thought, word and deed helps build strength of character and one can stand out like an oasis. Social service is also a very stressful activity and it is easy for one to give up in frustration. It is during these circumstances that the virtue of **patience** pays off. The tendency of most people is to keep searching for motives and they tend to look at those doing selfless service with a lot of suspicion. One needs enormous patience to accept people as they are and continue to do what one is doing with no desire for name, fame or any other tangible return. Gandhi also talks about the need for enormous patience. In

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his remarks on ‘Social Service and Reform’, he mentions that since it is the social worker who goes in search of people to serve, he needs to cultivate enormous patience to not get demotivated by the non-responsiveness of society towards the acts of service that he does.

Finally one needs to understand that any social change is a gradual process. In these days of instant gratification, one should have enormous **perseverance** to sustain the attempts and energy at bringing about this change. Surmounting a societal problem requires enormous will power and Vivekananda maintained that perseverance will always conquer. Working with the realities of social, economic and political diversity in India needs enormous perseverance. One could easily get fatigued and give up in frustration. Having these qualities of purity, patience, and perseverance not only helps a social worker serve society better, but also enables him to mature spiritually. Swami Vivekananda always saw selfless service to mankind as an opportunity for self-purification and a means to attain salvation.

Swamiji was a great observer of the human mind and the human society at large. He understood that undertaking any social change needed enormous energy and will. He could at once relate to the practical necessities that went into this kind of work. Hence he called upon the youth to not only build up their mental energies, but their physical ones as well. He wanted them to have **‘muscles of iron’** and **‘nerves of steel.’** (Vivekananda, Epistles (First series), 1989, p. 117)‘ He wanted the youth to possess indomitable will and the strength to drink up the ocean. What he wanted was to

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prepare the youth both physically and mentally to face the challenges that would lie ahead of social workers.

Swami Vivekananda was an inspirational leader who understood the power of both the written and spoken word. His message is so powerful that anyone reading through them cannot but be inspired to take on the cause of National Reconstruction. Many a young freedom fighter including Netaji Subash Chandra Bose owed their inspiration to the writings of Swamiji. Many people of the present generation owe their entire work to the message of Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji has said, *“Life is short, give it up to a great cause”* (Vivekananda, Epistles (First series), 1989, p. 37) and, *“He alone lives who lives for others; the rest are more dead than alive.”* (Vivekananda, Our duty to the Masses, 1989, p. 363) Such strong statements can make one to jump into action. It is only after one begins to understand the complexities of society and its response to our work will reality sink in. It is during those times that one very practical statement of Swamiji helps. He mentions, *“All good work must pass through three stages – Ridicule, Opposition and finally will come Acceptance.”* (Vivekananda, Epistles (First series), 1989, p. 91) What the young need is the purity, patience and the perseverance to go through these stages in whatever they do. Society though slow and sometimes treacherous in its reactions, finally comes around and accepts the good work that goes on for its own sake. One can also interpret what Swamiji said in a deeper manner. One needs to realize that it is not the ridicule, opposition or acceptance of society or anybody external that matters. Swamiji possibly spoke of something higher. While it is easy to be affected by the outside world, what truly matters is how we see our work and ourselves. It is so

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easy to ridicule ourselves and create opposition for our ideals in our own mind. Opposition comes in very subtle forms – it could be our own egoistic desire to be in control, to seek name and fame for what we are doing and to fall prey to the temptation of becoming the ‘provider’. It is only when we are able to see ourselves as instruments of a higher power through which good work gets done, will we be able to stay rested with the feeling of ‘Acceptance’.

People today are extremely result oriented and need to understand the reasons for what they need to do as well as the benefits of what they do. One also seeks a clear road map that can indicate where to begin and how to proceed. To them Swamiji had a simple formula. He laid down in clear and simple terms the three levels of service that one can undertake. He understood that ‘upliftment of the masses’ can be an abstract concept and needed to be broken down into more concrete and doable steps. The first is that of the **Physical** – taking care of the human body and undertaking activities to ameliorate human physical suffering. Running hospitals, orphanages, old-age homes, and various income generation programs would qualify for this level. The next higher level was that of **‘Intellectual service’**. Running schools, colleges and awareness and empowerment programs would operate at this level. And finally for the evolved – he prescribed the highest level of **Spiritual service**. He clearly wanted everyone to undertake these activities, not merely for the betterment of society but for the evolution and growth of the person undertaking the same. This is clearly the end of what he extolled everyone towards. He saw the ‘means’ of serving society leading on to the ‘end’ of spiritual growth of the person doing it. (Vivekananda, Karma Yoga, The

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secret of Work, 1989, pp. 52,53) And he so beautifully advised us in '*Serving God in man*'. All his philosophy so elegantly and simplistically packed into one statement. In such simple and lucid language that makes it at once achievable and attractive to one wanting to involved oneself in the service of others. This ideal not only looks within the reach of each one of us but also makes it so emotionally appealing and motivating to undertake. Mahatma Gandhi has written, "The easiest way to find oneself is to lose yourself in the service of others." This echoes what Swami Vivekananda kept mentioning. He saw service of others as a pathway to one's own spiritual evolution.

Swami Vivekananda also understood the ease with which one can lose focus and become absorbed with oneself. Working for others can easily be distracting and lead one to believe that one is indeed important and necessary for progress. One of the great challenges for people engaged in social work is the slow and insidious growth of our own ego. Most people start out with high ideals and with the intent of finding themselves in the work that they undertake. Little does one realize that one can actually lose oneself in this attempt? Vivekananda had thought this through and had a piece of advice for such people. He had remarked, "Do not stand on a pedestal and say, 'here my poor man, take my 5 cents'. Feel privileged that the poor man is there to give you an opportunity to serve him." (Vivekananda, Karma Yoga, We help ourselves, not the World, 1989, p. 76) Taking on the role of a provider defeats the very purpose of 'Service' and Swami Vivekananda has warned of the pitfalls of such an attitude. Internalizing our role as a 'provider' also makes the recipient look small and lacking in self esteem. It also provides space for the 'I' to grow which if left unchecked can

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develop into megalomania. As our engagement with society and its acceptance of our work grows, our attention also gradually shifts away from the ‘work that is getting done’ to ‘us doing the work’. There have been times when newspapers write about our work or awards and recognitions come our way, we actually begin to think that we must be doing a lot of constructive work. Many a well intentioned person can forget the real reason for embarking on such activities. One can start working for the marginalized and the downtrodden with only their amelioration in mind but as societal appreciation grows and visibility comes, it can cloud this inner evolution. As one loses focus and begins to get distracted, the philosophy of detached and dispassionate service starts dimming. It is then that another statement of Swamiji reminds one of the insignificance of our contribution and the need to perceive our role in the right perspective. He says, “Remember the cow that gives birth to a calf also knows how to feed it. God knows how to take care of his creation. Feel not that you are responsible for all that is happening. On the other hand, feel happy that you are allowed to be his instrument.”

He continues, “All the hospitals you build, all the schools you construct can all get washed away in one flood or crumble to dust in one earthquake. So, do not think too much of yourself. What matters is not what you do, but how you do it. Service without motive is one of the highest forms of spiritual activity and always remember to work with the selflessness and dispassion that such a work demands.” (Vivekananda, Karma Yoga, We help ourselves, not the World, 1989, p. 76) These are indeed powerful messages for people in the social sector and one needs to remember that our service

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will be enabling both for us and the people whom we work with, only when it is done in this spirit.

Understanding Swami Vivekananda and his message and putting it across to all Indians, especially the youth would be the simplest way in which we could address many of the problems that India is facing today. Each young person could begin with himself - by preparing for the work ahead by ensuring that his personality is well shaped and rounded. He needs to ensure that his physical, mental, social, and psychological faculties are well tuned to the work ahead. The young need direction and what greater focus than that of serving others. One also needs to understand that social service does not automatically translate as giving up all the worldly responsibilities and sitting half clad and starving in a remote village. It begins with arousing one's social conscience and translating this in practical terms into social action. One needs to be pragmatic and keep one's needs and limitations in mind before embarking on any such activity. One needs to begin with oneself first and then gradually expand this reach concentrically to include more and more deserving persons. This is one of the ways that the success and practicality of our social actions be demonstrated to the youth of today. Each young person can continue to be what he is – a technocrat, a scientist, an engineer or a doctor. There is so much within the circle of our own small lives that we could do something about. The idea is to start with these small changes and incrementally build on them. This could easily be the recipe for larger and greater tasks ahead. Being a good and honest technocrat, scientist, engineer, and a doctor itself is a good beginning. We could then expand to include more and more lives that we touch in our everyday existence.

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For those fortunate who are willing, capable and not limited by the demands of family and everyday mundane existence; they could take on more permanent projects and surge ahead in making social work their full time aspirations. Balancing ‘Work and life’ as good managers put it, need not be limited to the work atmosphere alone. We could easily extend this to the social realm too. By doing this, thousands of qualified and willing youth can be co-opted into spending quality time in more higher and nobler ventures. And finally what matters the most is the understanding that in undertaking social activities lies the answer not only to the problems of people around us, but also to our own inner problems and dilemmas.

Swamiji’s love for the masses was reflected in the fact that he was not only personally involved with such work but also understood that it could not stop with him. This shaped his focus onto building a team of people who would dedicate their lives for this cause. His life’s work was dedicated to not only the evolution of one’s own inner self but also the upliftment of the masses. Considering the gigantic proportion of the problem on hand, Swamiji realized that it could only be done by a dedicated band of committed young people. His life and message serves to not only inspire but also gives a blue print of action for sustaining such activities down the ages.

In conclusion Swami Vivekananda was not only a man of the masses but also constantly lived and thought about their welfare. He understood that no nation could grow and thrive at the cost of ignoring the development of the masses. He was a very pragmatic visionary who understood that service needs to be packaged as a spiritual-

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religious activity. He knew that it had to be done without affecting the dignity and self esteem of the masses. He also understood that people involving themselves in such societal action had to first be prepared for the challenges that could lie ahead. He wanted the young of the country to take on the responsibility of shouldering such initiatives and laid out a prescription for preparing such persons. His writings continue to inspire thousands of young men and women and have helped shape various such development initiatives around the world.

Limiting Swami Vivekananda to a mere Visionary thinker will also not do complete justice to his role as the benefactor of the masses. One hundred and fifty years down the lane – how does one see and understand him? It is like asking someone to describe how sweet the sweet that one has been eating was! Language and words are inadequate to describe something that is indescribable. Vivekananda cannot be truly defined or described; he needs to be experienced. He means so many things to so many different people that description will surely be limited by one's own personal experience and the subsequent interpretation. Is he the social reformer that one can see him as, or the humanist that he is for others, or the manager par excellence who set up one of India's greatest institutions, or a leader whose life is the closest definition that one can have of leadership itself, or is he the walking encyclopedia of *Sanatana Dharma* and spirituality or the perfect representative of India or a Saint or God himself? Asking one to define Swamiji is like asking a novice to describe time, space, and causation. We will surely be limited by what we think we see. Swamiji is all this and something beyond. He is a force, a concept that gives meaning to the very purpose of human

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existence itself. He is something that one can only experience as one tries to give meaning to this mundane existence of ours. This experiential message of Swamiji is timeless, endless, limitless, ever relevant, and ever pragmatic. This 'concept' is not something that can be limited by geography or by the other limitations that a human mind can conceive of. This force can only be felt and experienced fully and meaningfully by surrendering oneself to the instrumentality called Vivekananda.

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