

Swami Vivekananda & Hindu Society in USA Today

By Dr Hiro Badlani

As we are entering the year 2012, the excitement of celebration of 150th birthday of Swami Vivekananda (Born on January 12, 1863) becomes more palpable. Whole year is dedicated to honor and pay homage to the noble work done by the great Swami. Millions of Hindus as well as many non-Hindus all over the world will celebrate the most auspicious event with joy and anticipation. For Hindu society in USA, it may be a good opportunity to introspect and analyze its status and position today; Swami Vivekananda was the pioneer who first brought the message of Hinduism to this country in 1893. He was a visionary par excellence and so too he was saturated with divine spirituality; it will be worthwhile to follow his legacy with utmost sincerity.

Legacy of Swami Vivekananda:

At the World Conference of Religions in Chicago, he entranced his audience with his very first speech. The essence of Vedanta, he taught, lies in the unity of entire cosmos! He began his address to his audience with the famous words, "Brothers and sisters of America!" It was Swami Vivekananda who promoted Hinduism as a pluralistic and scientific religion and who projected the idea of neo-Vedanta as



a philosophy of religion beyond borders. He said in his famous address to the World Conference,

“As the different streams in different places all mingle their waters in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they may appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee”

The concept of unity of all religions was really not the original idea of Swami Vivekananda; he was rather propagating the message of his guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhans, who in turn taught the oneness of God for all mankind, as the ancient Vedas and Upanishads had pronounced—Ekam sad, viprah bahuda Vedanti. He even displayed extraordinary spiritual temper by actually observing the disciplines of both Christianity and Islam and by experiencing the validity of his statement.

It is true that though all religions are similar, they are not the same; there are differences too, and each has its own unique role to play in the world. But as in the family at home, we need to emphasize more on the unity and homogeneity rather than on the division and discord. Our sages have repeatedly prompted us to consider all mankind as one divine family of God—Vasudhaiva Kutumbkum. If there are two pigeons in the cage, which pigeon will grow more? Obviously the one which is fed more! If we talk more and more of disunity and differences, it will soon become a monster of our own making—beyond our control after a period of time. The consequences of such antagonistic mindset may indeed not be the wisest choice for our future generations!

Hindu society in USA Today:

Hindu society in USA at present has two faces: Strong face and weak face. First I shall describe the strong face:

There are now more than two million Hindus in USA. It will perhaps be not wrong to say that for Hindus, USA has become in recent times the preferred second home. It is also a well-known fact that this nation is a land of immigrants. The framers of the constitution laid a very strong and firm foundation for equality of human rights. Freedom of speech, work, religious pursuit, and other daily vocations were given the highest priority. Hindus in USA have generally done very well in the field of education, economic progress, home buying, family

traditions etc. They have especially made their mark in medical and computer fields. Their contribution in NASA and Boeing is noteworthy. Many have climbed on the top positions in the corporate world. They are also now showing their skills in the White House top administrative jobs. Hindus have acquired a good reputation as law abiding community with very low crime rate. Hindu youths have excelled in Science, Dance—both classical Indian dances and Hindi Films, National Spelling competitions etc. Hindus have recently shown their mark in politics also.

There are now more than 800 Hindu temples in USA—some of them are most gorgeous and elegant landmark structures. Undoubtedly there are more Hindu temples in USA than in any other country outside India. Most temples are multi-deity temples encouraging all different sects to visit and worship together.

Although it is always good to know about our ‘strong side’ so that we can capitalize on it, plan our activities and shape the future in more meaningful way, Hindu culture abhors any self praise. Modesty is valued; making any derogatory remarks about others is also not encouraged.

As it happens always, there is the weak side also. It is equally good to know about our weak side too. Spirituality in Hinduism has also been defined as Adhya-atma. In simple language it may also mean to look within and do the introspection to cleanse ourselves of any negative adharmic behavior. Indeed it is more prudent to look within to find out our own weak points and work upon them than to harp on the defects of others or simply gloat on our achievements repeatedly. Nor of course it is necessary to be overly concerned or become too apologetic about the same.

Hindu society in USA needs to take note of the weak face: Hindus are not making enough efforts to integrate with the mainstream ethos of the nation. They tend to remain isolated and cut off. They may also work on such aspects of their daily life like organizational capacity, time management, account keeping etc.

Hindu temples may also look into some of the inadequate features like general hygiene, proper discipline, social network, community service etc. Hindu temples may need to make serious efforts to make temples ready to accommodate and welcome

our coming generations; those around hundred or two hundred years from now, would perhaps not accept the temples, which are not on par with other places of worship, whatever the denominations. New survey has shown that about 38% of Hindu, Jain, and Sikh young adults in America are married to Christians, Jews, or Muslims. The children of these mixed marriages are likely to visit both Hindu as well as other non-Hindu places of worship. Since this section is likely to be a very large portion of future Hindu community, their special needs should be kept in mind now itself and plan in good time to cater to their special requirements in the future. The settings in Hindu temples may also need to be modified to suit and comfortably accommodate the non-Hindu spouses of the future.

Hinduism has been basically a dynamic non-dogmatic religion; it responds to call for change more positively without much hesitation. This in fact is the only reason how it has survived to become the oldest living religion of the world, when many others perished.

It is also good to note that though Hindus have now got a respectable count of more than 2 millions in USA, it is still less than one percent of the total population. For Hindus, who have enjoyed the majority status of nearly 80 percent in India, this is surely a matter of some disadvantage and stress. There is inevitable occasional hostility from other major groups for various reasons; this too may be taken in stride. Even more, this low figure of one percent may persist permanently or at least for long time to come. They may learn to face this situation with patience and courage. In fact, minority status is not necessarily a handicap; it gives one a lot more incentive to compete, learn and excel, and face the challenges head on than one in the majority status. The people with big wealth, scientists and doctors, sport heroes, artists, authors and poets etc. are all in the minority status, but they invariably do very well without causing any ripple in the society. Our ancient scriptures are full of spiritual wisdom. True spirituality, simply stated, is living a life of virtue and ethics. Tolerance (sahan shakti), not confrontation, always has been the watchword of

Hindu philosophy. They may do well to recall the old decree of Mahabharat: Tasmāt tikshnataram mridu—“By gentleness one can overcome the greatest difficulty in the world.” When there is more injustice, one may of course take recourse to judicial procedures. Our spiritual gurus like Swami Vivekananda however chose to resolve the matters more often without such extreme actions. Hindus may not be very vocal and loud about the grievances; instead they may pay more attention on looking within toward their duties. Hindus may however always remain within the boundaries of law; crossing those limits may become a costly mistake!

Swami Vivekananda and Hindu Society in USA

Now coming back again to Swami Vivekananda, it is worthwhile to remember that Swamiji, after arriving in 1893, stayed in USA only for a few years. He had no money with him and India was then under the domain of British rule enjoying little command and reputation. But he accomplished so much; he founded the Vedanta Society in New York in 1895, and made an immense impact through his lectures and discourses. He cast a magical spell on the American people and so many high ranking persons—giant literary figures, industrialists, business tycoons, Hollywood movie stars—became his ardent followers. Around 1920 another equally remarkable spiritual figure Swami Yogananda Paramhans arrived in USA. He lived here for many years and



he too built an immense network of worship centers all over the country, especially in South California. Undoubtedly both the Swamis had most exalted spirituality, both worked very hard and both had very imposing personality. But it is pertinent to note that both of them had great courage and vision; they ‘adapted’ to American system in a big way. The temples and worship centers were very clean, hygienic, and very well organized to the minute detail. The sitting arrangements of the devotees, the dress code of the presiding priest, language in the temple discourse etc. were very suited to the local populace. They attracted big crowds in these spiritual centers, and even today more than a century later these temples and places of worship are highly rated

in the country. They have huge estates worth many millions of dollars and are managed exceedingly well even today. They too had their inevitable share of trials and tribulations as well as tough oppositions from certain quarters, but it did not matter in the end.

Our sages have always prompted us to be introspective and look within. Hindus may recall how they would feel about other minorities in India. Often they would think that those groups did not fully integrate themselves with the country, they did not accept their social responsibilities sincerely etc. Now here in USA, they have the opportunity to look at the things from the other side. For Hindus, religion or Dharma is the supreme lighthouse;

Said Swami Vivekananda: "Neither politics nor military power, not commercial supremacy nor mechanical genius furnishes India with that backbone, but religion nor religion alone is all that we have."

The spiritual virtues of love, compassion, sacrifice, service, caring, humility, tolerance etc. are always our best assets in day to day life. In a world where we are always searching for a moment of peace and joy, a question was put to Revered Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Swamnarayan sect, the living saint of the highest

stature in our own time: "You have a master key; as a result, you are always happy and at peace, no matter what difficulties you face. What is the secret?" He replied, "Sarvamangal—one who is always happy—has the master key! It is to obey the command of God at all times, to be tolerant, humble, and to serve everyone." We may look at the legacy of Swami Vivekananda with both humility and optimism. We may also gear for changes—big astounding changes if necessary—as he had proclaimed, "There is nothing like a closed book on Vedantism. Something, which is considered useful to human society, may be adopted at any time."

About the author

Dr Hiro Badlani is the author of Hinduism: Path of the Ancient Wisdom. All 65 chapters of the book are also uploaded on the web site www.hinduismpath.com. He may be contacted at hgbadlani@aol.com.

Above article is in response to an editorial comment at the end of an inspiring article in July-Sept issue, "A Call from Appalachian Trail by Hindu Americans" by Dr Mahesh Mehta, inviting more thoughts and comments. ■

Letter to the Editor

Avadoot Swami

I have had a chance to read your July-Sept, 2011 issue and would like to take issue with the conclusions. Specifically I am quoting your words here;

'the essence of Vedic knowledge is that the individual self (Aatman) carries the holographic image of the universal self (Brahman).'

I think it would be good if all the respected gentlemen of Hindu identity try and come to a proper understanding of their dharma by adhering to the words of God. I am referring to the words of the song of God, known to most as the Bhagavad Gita. There in chapter 15 you will find this statement, 'Whoever knows Me as the Supreme God, without doubting, is the knower of everything. He therefore engages himself in full devotional service to Me, O son of Bharat. This is the most confidential part of the Vedic scriptures, O sinless one, and it is disclosed now by Me.'

The false idea that Brahman manifests as the

individual 'atma' is an idea propagated by Shree Shankaracharya, whose non-Vedic thoughts known as Advaitavad or Mayavada have now become the sum and substance of modern Vedic (Hindu) dharma, unfortunately. It is specifically revealed in the Padma Purana that Shivji or Shankar advented as Shankaracharya under the order of Shree Vishnu to propound a false doctrine just to bewilder the populace.

Response from Dr. Mahesh Mehta

Avadhut Maharajji has quoted our scripture Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta and I have no disagreement with his interpretation, knowledge or understanding of the subject. After all I am not an Avdhut, Guru or swami and hence do not want to claim any authority on Dharma. However, one cannot easily discard the teachings of Shreemad Shankaracharya or Swami Vivekananda and decide about the authenticity of their Realizations. I would like to learn more from Avdhut Maharajji how he interprets Ishavasyam Idam Sarvam yatkinchit jagtyam jagat. I have understood this to mean Aatman is the Holographic image of Brahman. ■