

Rationalist, Scientific, Socialist

Vivekananda

- Dr. Dattaprasad Dabholkar



INTRODUCTION

The title of this booklet, “Rationalist, Scientific, Socialist Vivekananda” must have taken you by surprise. Propaganda by Hindu fundamentalists has ensured that Vivekananda’s real thoughts never reached the people. So today he is popularly known as a Hindutvawadi (i.e., fundamentalist Hindu) saint. Appropriating icons like Vivekananda to spread fundamentalist views in society is a very old strategy of Hindu fundamentalists, they have done this with Shivaji too and today they are trying to do the same with Dr. Ambedkar.

This booklet is based on the writings of Dr. Dattaprasad Dabholkar that authentically bring forth the true thoughts of Swami Vivekananda. Dr. Dabholkar has extensively researched into Vivekananda’s letters, other writings and talks. Based on his research, he has written a book in Marathi, titled *Shodh Swami Vivekanandacha*¹ (Discovering Swami Vivekananda), and also several articles that have been published in leading Marathi magazines. In these writings, Dr. Dabholkar gives a detailed exposition of the Swami’s clear views on the caste system, women’s emancipation, religion, rationalism, scientific outlook and socialism. He clearly brings out Vivekananda’s striving to build an egalitarian and socialist society. This booklet is an edited version of articles by Dr. Dabholkar published in the Marathi weekly *Sadhana*.

Ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the Centre in 2014, Hindu fundamentalists have been pushing ahead their communal agenda with great speed. They attack the very idea of India as a democratic, secular and socialist nation as enshrined in the Constitution, and have launched an all-out offensive to re-establish a society based on the *Manusmriti* and the caste system. They have intensified campaigns like ‘Ghar Wapsi’ and ‘Love Jihad’ to intimidate minorities, and brazenly attack their places of worship. They now openly use the state machinery to deepen the communal divide through means like rewriting text books and saffronising education, attacking historians who write from a materialist viewpoint, promoting mythology in place of scientific thought, and appointing people associated with the Hindutva agenda as heads and members of important academic, research and cultural organisations and committees. The way RSS leaders are openly interacting with BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, clearly shows not merely that the BJP Government supports and promotes the RSS, but that the RSS is remote controlling the government.

Especially worrisome is the growing atmosphere of terror in the country, created by goons born out of this fascist culture of hate and

intolerance. In just two years, three rationalist thinkers have been murdered in broad daylight: Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, who led a non-violent movement against superstitions practised in different religions; Comrade Govind Pansare, who authored a book that debunked Hindutva propaganda about Shivaji being an anti-Muslim king and showed how he was actually a secular king loved by people from all castes and religions; and now Prof. M.M. Kalburgi, the renowned rationalist thinker and former Vice-Chancellor of Hampi University, Karnataka. There is little new in these killings. From Socrates, Charvak, Tukaram to Mahatma Gandhi—all sacrificed their lives on the altar of rationalism.

A spectre of fascism looms over the country. At such a time, it is important to spread Vivekananda's true thoughts and ideas among the people. Vivekananda was not a traditional Hindu monk as the Sangh Parivar makes him out to be. He was a modern ascetic with a scientific and materialist outlook who unequivocally stated: *We must strive to eliminate caste, we should believe in rational thinking instead of the scriptures, and that progress is not possible without individual freedom and women's liberation.* While living as a Hindu saint, he was also thoroughly secular. He stated: *Our motherland is the land where confluence of two great traditions—Hinduism and Islam—has taken place. Make the Vedas the brain and Islam the body of this land. In my inner self, I dream of such an integrated India.*² And further: *Instead of cowsheds, be concerned about how people live.* Unlike other saints, he did not offer prayers to the Almighty for his own salvation but sought salvation of the poor and the marginalised—be they Hindus, Muslims or Christians—who had been oppressed for ages. He dedicated his life for their upliftment: *“May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God that I believe in, the sum total of all souls—the miserable and the poor of all races, of all species.”*³ Critical of the way the Brahmin priesthood exploited the people of this country, he declared: *“No religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism.”*⁴ He asserted that religious conversions to Christianity and Islam had taken place in the country not because of coercion but due to caste atrocities. He was a supporter of reservations for the lower castes. In 1896 Vivekananda proclaimed himself a socialist.

To counter the fascist cultural offensive, it is necessary to bring the real views of Vivekananda to light, and his remarkable persona as a rational, scientific and socialist saint. It is with this aim that we publish this booklet.

RATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, SOCIALIST VIVEKANANDA

Dr. Dattaprasad Dabholkar

It is the 20th of August 1893 in the village of Metcalf (USA). Vivekananda is spending time at the farmhouse of Kate Sanborne, a well-known author and former teacher of English literature at Smith College, Massachusetts. People are making fun of him because he has come without an invitation to speak at the World Parliament of Religions. But he is hardly bothered, confident that he will find a way to get the invitation. On this day no religious discourse crosses his mind. The letter he pens to his disciples focusses on something else, the conditions of “the poor, the low, in India” who “have no chance, no escape, no way to climb up”, and “the wail of woe, of misery, of degradation and poverty, that has filled the Indian atmosphere—the result of centuries of oppression.” He goes on to say that he has “discovered the secret” for remedying this state of things, burning down “the mountain of misery that has been heaped upon India for ages”, and that even though “it is not the work of a day, and the path is full of the most deadly thorns... we will succeed.”⁵

There was a reason why Vivekananda said this with so much confidence. He had left Baranagar Math in 1890 at the age of 27 to become a wandering saint. For three years until 31 May 1893 when he sailed from Calcutta for America, he traversed the length and breadth of India. What he saw deeply disturbed him. His numerous letters to friends and disciples are filled with his anguish over the terrible lot of the poor and dispossessed and his craving to find ways to bring them out of their wretchedness.

After much contemplation, in some of his later letters he wrote that he had found the way to liberate the 20 crore Hindu, Muslim and Christian men, women and children who flounder in poverty, ignorance, blind customs, traditions and superstitions, and that this path is based on the three principles of rationalism, science and equality.

Scientific and Rational Vivekananda

Vivekananda was an exceptionally scientific saint. He was unequivocal in saying:

Do not believe in anything blindly.

“We do not recognise such a thing as miracles... Most of the strange things which are done in India and reported in the foreign papers are sleight-of-hand tricks or hypnotic illusions. They are not the performances of the wise men.”⁶

In a talk delivered on 8 March 1895, he says:

“I look upon miracles as the greatest stumbling-blocks in the way of truth.”⁷

In a letter to Kidi (Singaravelu Mudaliar) on 30 November 1894, he wrote:

Miracles “do not prove anything. Matter does not prove Spirit. What connection is there between the existence of God, Soul, or immortality, and the working of miracles?... Do not disturb your head with metaphysical nonsense, and do not disturb others by your bigotry.”⁸

Likewise, he was unambiguous in debunking astrology.

“You will find that astrology and all these mystical things are generally signs of a weak mind; therefore as soon as they are becoming prominent in our minds, we should see a physician, take good food and rest.”⁹

Quoting the Buddha, Vivekananda goes so far as to say that those who propagate such rubbish are actually cunning people who do so because they have made this a source of their livelihood:

“Those that get a living by calculation of the stars by such art and other lying tricks are to be avoided.”¹⁰

To illustrate he narrates a story:

“There is an old story of an astrologer who came to a king and said, ‘You are going to die in six months.’ The king was frightened out of his wits and was almost about to die then and there from fear. But his minister was a clever man, and this man told the king that these astrologers were fools. The king would not believe him. So the minister saw no other way to make the king see that they were fools but to invite the astrologer to the palace again. There he asked him if his calculations were correct.

I would rather see every one of you rank atheists than superstitious fools, for the atheist is alive and you can make something out of him. But if superstition enters, the brain is gone, the brain is softening, degradation has seized upon the life.

– *Volume 3, Lectures from Colombo to Almora, The Work Before Us.*

The astrologer said that there could not be a mistake, but to satisfy him he went through the whole of the calculations again and then said that they were perfectly correct. The king's face became livid. The minister said to the astrologer, 'And when do you think that you will die?' 'In twelve years,' was the reply. The minister quickly drew his sword and separated the astrologer's head from the body and said to the king, 'Do you see this liar? He is dead this moment.'"¹¹

In the same way, Vivekananda calls upon people not to believe in ghosts and superstitions. In a hard-hitting talk delivered at the Triplicane Literary Society, Madras, on 9 February 1897, he says:

We have to weed out "the hundreds of superstitions that we have been hugging to our breasts for centuries... Mystery mongering and superstition are always signs of weakness. These are always signs of degradation and of death... Shame on humanity that strong men should spend their time on these superstitions, spend all their time in inventing allegories to explain the most rotten superstitions..."¹²

In a letter to the Editor of *Light of the East* (1896), he wrote:

"I have always found 'Occultism' injurious and weakening to humanity."¹³

Blaming the Brahmins for the spread of superstitions among the masses, Vivekananda charged that they had a vested interest in keeping the masses steeped in backwardness so as to savagely exploit them. In a letter to Haridas Viharidas Desai on 22 August 1892, he wrote:

"Do not believe in what you have heard," says the great Buddha, "do not believe in doctrines because they have been handed down to you through generations; do not believe in anything because it is followed blindly by many; do not believe because some old sage makes a statement; do not believe in truths to which you have become attached by habit; do not believe merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Have deliberation and analyse, and when the result agrees with reason and conduces to the good of one and all, accept it and live up to it."

– Volume 4, *Lectures and Discourses, The Claims of Religion.*

“The people... have for their religion a certain bundle of local superstitions about eating, drinking, and bathing, and that is about the whole of their religion. Poor fellows! Whatever the rascally and wily priests teach them—all sorts of mummery and tomfoolery as the very gist of the Vedas and Hinduism (mind you, neither these rascals of priests nor their forefathers have so much as seen a volume of the Vedas for the last 400 generations)—they follow and degrade themselves. Lord help them from the Rakshasas in the shape of the Brahmins of the Kaliyuga.”¹⁴

Even during his voyage from India to America in 1893, he fretted over the role of the Brahmins in blocking the country’s progress. From Yokohama (Japan), he wrote to his disciples on 10 July 1893:

“Kick out the priests who are always against progress, because they would never mend, their hearts would never become big. They are the offspring of centuries of superstition and tyranny.”¹⁵

Towards the end of 1895, in a letter to his friend Rakhal (Swami Bramhananda) from Baranagar Math, he wrote:

“Monks and Sannyasins and Brahmins of a certain type have thrown the country into ruin. Intent all the while on theft and wickedness, these pose as preachers of religion! They will take gifts from the people and at the same time cry, ‘Don’t touch me!’ And what great things they have been doing!—‘If a potato happens to touch a brinjal, how long will the universe last before it is deluged?’ ‘If they do not apply earth a dozen times to clean their hands, will fourteen generations of ancestors go to hell, or twenty-four?’—For intricate problems like these they have been finding out scientific explanations for the last two thousand years—while one-fourth of the people are starving. A girl of eight is married to a man of thirty, and the parents are jubilant over it... And if anyone protests against it, the plea is put forward, ‘Our religion is being overturned.’

Buddha was more brave and sincere than any teacher. He said: "Believe no book; the Vedas are all humbug. If they agree with me, so much the better for the books."

– Vol. 7, *Inspired Talks*, 10 July 1895.

What sort of religion have they who want to see their girls becoming mothers before they attain puberty even and offer scientific explanations for it? Many, again, lay the blame at the door of the Mohammedans. They are to blame, indeed! Just read the *Grihya-Sutras* through and see what is given as the marriageable age of a girl... There it is expressly stated that a girl must be married before attaining puberty. The entire *Grihya-Sutras* enjoin this. And in the Vedic Ashvamedha sacrifice worse things would be done... All the *Brahmanas* mention them, and all the commentators admit them to be true.”¹⁶

Vivekananda called upon the people to give up blind faith and believe in reason. In a talk on 24 May 1896 he said:

“Why was reason given us if we have to believe? Is it not tremendously blasphemous to believe against reason? What right have we not to use the greatest gift that God has given to us? I am sure God will pardon a man who will use his reason and cannot believe, rather than a man who believes blindly instead of using the faculties He has given him. He simply degrades his nature and goes down to the level of the beasts—degrades his senses and dies.”¹⁷

He asked his listeners not to believe blindly in any scripture. During his lectures, he would often say:

“Do not believe in a thing because you have read about it in a book. Do not believe in a thing because another man has said it was true. Do not believe in words because they are hallowed by tradition. Find out the truth for yourself. Reason it out. That is realisation.”¹⁸

In a talk on 24 June 1895, he stated:

“Books are not an end-all. Verification is the only proof of religious truth.”¹⁹

By stressing that unless the country is freed from the fetters of superstitions, rituals and traditions, freedom will have no meaning, Vivekananda bestowed a

Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and marriage, and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others.

– Vol. 4, *Writings: Prose, To My Brave Boys.*

new dimension to the country's freedom struggle. He said:

“None deserves liberty who is not ready to give liberty. Suppose the English give over to you all the power. Why, the powers that be then, will hold the people down, and let them not have it. Slaves want power to make slaves.”²⁰

Vivekananda was thus calling for a cultural renaissance. In a letter to his friend Shashi (Swami Ramakrishnananda) on 19 March 1894, he wrote:

“We, as a nation, have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality and raise the masses.”²¹

In the same letter, he outlined a plan of action for uplifting the masses:

“Suppose some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandala, through oral teaching, and by means of maps, cameras, globes, and such other accessories—can't that bring forth good in time?...

“To effect this, the first thing we need is men, and the next is funds. Through the grace of our Guru I was sure to get from ten to fifteen men in every town. I next travelled in search of funds, but do you think the people of India were going to spend money!... Selfishness personified—are they to spend anything? Therefore I have come to America, to earn money myself, and then return to my country and devote the rest of my days to the realisation of this one aim of my life.”

A disciple of Swami Vivekananda recorded the following incident related to the Swami in his diary.

Once an enthusiastic preacher belonging to the society for protection of cows came for an interview with Swamiji. After inquiring about the object of the society, its source of income and how much money it has collected, “Swamiji commenced the following conversation with the preacher. Swamiji: ‘A terrible famine has now broken out in Central India. The Indian Government has published a death-roll of nine lakhs of starved people. Has your society done anything to render

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help in this time of famine?’... Preacher: ‘This famine broke out as a result of men’s Karma, their sins. It is a case of ‘like Karma, like fruit.’ Hearing the words of the preacher, sparks of fire, as it were, scintillated in Swamiji’s large eyes; his face became flushed. But he suppressed his feelings and said: ‘... If you make a plea of Karma by saying that men die through their Karma, then... with regard to your cause also, it can be said—the mother-cows through their own Karma fall into the hands of the butchers and die, and we need not do anything in the matter.’ The preacher was a little abashed and said: ‘Yes, what you say is true, but the Shastras say that the cow is our mother.’ Swamiji smilingly said, ‘Yes, that the cow is our mother, I understand: who else could give birth to such accomplished children?’... The preacher went away after saluting Swamiji. Then Swamiji began to speak to us: ‘What words, these, forsooth! Says he that men are dying by reason of their Karma, so what avails doing any kindness to them! This is decisive proof that the country has gone to rack and ruin!... Those who are men and yet have no feeling in the heart for man, well, are such to be counted as men at all?’”*

Vivekananda expressed his views on cow slaughter even more lucidly in a talk given at Madura (now Madurai) on 2 February 1897:

“We must also remember that in every little village-god and every little superstition custom is that which we are accustomed to call our religious faith. But local customs are infinite and contradictory... The greatest mistake made is that ignorant people always think that this local custom is the essence of our religion... You have always to remember that because a little social custom is going to be changed you are not going to lose your religion, not at all. Remember these customs have already been changed. There was a time in this very India when, without eating beef, no Brahmin could remain a Brahmin; you read in the Vedas how, when a Sannyasin, a king, or a great man came into a house, the best bullock was killed; how in time it was found that as we were

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an agricultural race, killing the best bulls meant annihilation of the race. Therefore the practice was stopped, and a voice was raised against the killing of cows. Sometimes we find existing then what we now consider the most horrible customs. In course of time other laws had to be made. These in turn will have to go, and other Smritis will come... In plain words, we have first to learn the distinction between the essentials and the non-essentials in everything. The essentials are eternal, the non-essentials have value only for a certain time; and if after a time they are not replaced by something essential, they are positively dangerous.”[†]

* *Volume 6, Conversations and Dialogues, From the Diary of a Disciple (Sharatchandra Chakravarty): I, 1897.*

† *Volume 3, Lectures from Colombo to Almora, Reply to the Address of Welcome at Madura.*

Vivekananda on the Caste System

Vivekananda was ahead of his time. When the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle were ambivalent about criticising caste, Vivekananda took a firm stand against the barbaric and exploitative caste system. He called its hereditary nature “gibberish” and asked for special efforts to spread education amongst the lowest castes. He implicitly called for elimination of caste.

He was conscious of the injustice of the caste system from his youth. On 17 August 1889, while in his early twenties, he wrote a letter to Pramadas Mitra of Varanasi, an orthodox Hindu:

“I have no doubt that according to the ancient view in this country, caste was hereditary, and it cannot also be doubted that sometimes the Shudras used to be oppressed more than the helots among the Spartans and the negroes among the Americans!”²²

In a letter from Chicago on 2 November 1893 to his disciple Alasinga Perumal, he wrote:

“In spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which... is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench...”²³

On 28 December 1893 he wrote to Haripada Mitra:

“If anybody is born of a low caste in our country, he is gone for ever, there is no hope for him. Why? What a tyranny it is!... How many people really weep for the sorrows and sufferings of the millions of poor in India?... We do not touch them, we avoid their company! Are we men? Those thousands of Brahmanas—what are they doing for the low, down-trodden masses of India? ‘Don’t touch’, ‘Don’t touch’, is the only phrase that plays upon their lips!”²⁴

Vivekananda lambasted the upper caste youth for their obsession with their caste superiority and untouchability in scathing words:

“And you, what are you?... talking twaddle all your lives, vain talkers... Sitting down these hundreds of years with an ever-increasing load of crystallised superstition on your heads, for hundreds of years spending all your energy upon discussing the touchableness or untouchableness of this food or that, with all humanity crushed out of you by the continuous social tyranny of ages...”²⁵

He came down harshly on the Brahmins for their “super-arrogant excellence of birth” that he dismissed as “pure myth”, and called upon them to raise the non-Brahmins around them—“not in the spirit of a master—not with the rotten canker of egotism crawling with superstitions and the charlatantry of East and West”—to the same status as themselves.²⁶

A letter to Sister Nivedita on 4 July 1897 from Almora testified to his practice of what he preached. In it he wrote that the Brahmin boys of his ashram, for the first time since the days of Buddha, were nursing the sick irrespective of their caste.²⁷

More than British colonisation, Vivekananda held the caste system responsible for India’s appalling poverty and degradation. In February 1897, soon after his return to India from a hugely successful trip to America and Europe, he spoke at Kumbakonam, a village in Tamil Nadu,

Buddha was the only great Indian philosopher who would not recognise caste, and not one of his followers remains in India. All the other philosophers pandered more or less to social prejudices; no matter how high they soared, still a bit of the vulture remained in them.

– Volume 7, *Inspired Talks*, 9 July 1895.

160 miles from Madras and a stronghold of Brahmin fundamentalists:

“Ay, my friends, I must tell you a few harsh truths... (It is) not the English (but) we who are responsible for all our misery and all our degradation... Our aristocratic ancestors went on treading the common masses of our country underfoot, till they became helpless, till under this torment the poor, poor people nearly forgot that they were human beings. They have been compelled to be merely hewers of wood and drawers of water for centuries, so much so, that they are made to believe that they are born as slaves... Not only so, but I also find that all sorts of most demoniacal and brutal arguments, culled from the crude ideas of hereditary transmission and other such gibberish... are brought forward in order to brutalise and tyrannise over the poor all the more.”²⁸

In fact, he wrote:

“India’s doom was sealed the very day they invented the word *mlechcha* and stopped from communion with others.”²⁹

In a letter written to his disciples on 24 January 1894, Vivekananda went even further and implicitly called for bringing down the caste system:

“My idea is to bring to the door of the meanest, the poorest, the noble ideas that the human race has developed both in and out of India, and let them think for themselves... ‘Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, of growth, and well-being.’ Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down. Caste or no caste, creed or no creed, any man, or class, or caste, or nation, or institution which bars the power of free thought and action of an individual—even so long as that power does not injure others—is devilish and must go down.”³⁰

In a letter to Alasinga written on 9 April 1894, he expressed the hope that,

A day will come “when there will be one caste.”³¹

Vivekananda was also a strong advocate of education for the Dalits. In a letter to Rakhal in 1895, he wrote:

There is no such thing as fate. There is nothing to compel us. What we have done, that we can undo.

– Volume 1, *Lectures and Discourses, Soul, God and Religion.*

“If there is inequality... the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, a Brahmin is not so much in need of education as a Chandala. If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten.”³²

He appealed to the Brahmins to give up their privileges so that the lower castes too can advance, and in effect called for 100% reservation for the lower castes:

“Ay, Brahmins... spend no more money on the Brahmin’s education, but spend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for there all the gift is needed. If the Brahmin is born clever, he can educate himself without help. If the others are not born clever, let them have all the teaching and the teachers they want. This is justice and reason as I understand it.”³³

Vivekananda on Religion

The definition that Vivekananda gave for religion is simply beautiful:

We need a new God, new religion, and new Vedas.

“To devote your life to the good of all and to the happiness of all is religion.”³⁴

An untraditional Hindu saint, his views on religion are completely opposed to the propaganda of Hindu fundamentalists. Today they are able to project a false image of Vivekananda and use him to spread their doctrine of hatred towards other religions, because people are unaware of Vivekananda as he really was.

He held that all true religions are equal holding the same ideals,

“The proof of one religion depends on the proof of all the rest... if one religion is true, all others must be true.”³⁵

and further:

“The ideal of all religions... is same—the attaining of liberty and cessation of misery.”³⁶

In December 1966, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Article 18 of this Covenant recognises that:

- Everyone shall have the right to have or adopt a religion of his/her choice;
- Everyone shall have the freedom to manifest his/her religion through worship, observance and practice;

- No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his/her freedom to have or adopt a religion of his/her choice.

Seventy years before the world's nations adopted this Covenant, Vivekananda preached respect and dignity for all religions:

“What is needed is a fellow-feeling between the different types of religion, seeing that they all stand or fall together, a fellow-feeling which springs from mutual esteem and mutual respect.”³⁷

Vivekananda treads where Hindu fundamentalists wouldn't dare. He called Mohammed “the Messenger of equality” and the “Prophet... of the brotherhood of man.”³⁸ In a letter to Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain written on 10 June 1898, he wrote:

“... if ever any religion approached to this equality in an appreciable manner, it is Islam and Islam alone.”³⁹

Conscious of India's syncretic culture, he observed in a letter to his Madras disciples on 19 November 1894 that the Hindus had learnt several elements of “material civilisation”, such as wearing tailor-made clothes and food hygiene, from the Mohammedans.⁴⁰ Vivekananda emphasised that if this country is to progress, if India in the future is to rise “glorious and invincible”, there must not only be cooperation among all religions, but their confluence. In the above mentioned letter to Sarfaraz Husain, he further wrote:

“I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind... For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam —Vedanta brain and Islam body—is the only hope.”⁴¹

While traversing the country as a wandering Sanyasi between 1890 and 1893, Vivekananda had closely observed the terrible poverty in which millions of people were living, and its close relationship to religious backwardness and exploitation by Brahmin sadhus. Deeply disturbed by it, he wrote about it to his friends and disciples in words that spew fire as from a smouldering volcano.

“A country where millions of people live on flowers of the Mohua plant, and a million or two of Sadhus and a hundred million or so of Brahmins suck the blood out of these poor people, without even the least effort for their amelioration—is that a country or hell? Is that a religion, or the devil's dance?”⁴²

Vivekananda warned people against religious fundamentalists' attempts to propagate all kinds of myths and divide Hindus and Muslims. One such false propaganda is about forcible conversions. Vivekananda exposed the falsity of this propaganda in at least two letters, whose essence is: In this country, *religious conversions have not taken place because of atrocities by Christians and Muslims, but because of atrocities by the upper castes.*

Letter 1: To Pandit Shankarlal of Khetri, 20 September 1892:

“If a Bhangi comes to anybody as a Bhangi, he would be shunned as the plague; but no sooner does he get a cupful of water poured upon his head with some mutterings of prayers by a Padri, and get a coat on his back, no matter how threadbare, and come into the room of the most orthodox Hindu—I don't see the man who then dare refuse him a chair and a hearty shake of the hands! Irony can go no further... In Travancore, the most priest-ridden country in India—where every bit of land is owned by the Brahmins... nearly one-fourth has become Christian! And I cannot blame them...”⁴³

Letter 2: To Haridas Viharidas Desai, November 1894:

“Why amongst the poor of India so many are Mohammedans? It is nonsense to say, they were converted by the sword. It was to gain their liberty from the... zemindars and from the... priest, and as a consequence you find in Bengal there are more Mohammedans than Hindus amongst the cultivators, because there were so many zemindars there. Who thinks of raising these sunken downtrodden millions?”⁴⁴

Today the RSS and its affiliates pursue a vicious campaign of low-intensity but sustained violence against Muslims and Christians to terrorise and intimidate them, so that they either convert 'back' to Hinduism or internalise their subordinate status and accept that they are living in India at the mercy of the 'Hindu majority'. The teachings of Vivekananda exactly oppose all that the Sangh Parivar stands for. He denounced forcible conversions as well as re-conversions, like the current 'Ghar Wapsi' campaign of the Sangh Parivar:

I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth.

– Volume 5, Epistles—First Series, XXI, Alasinga, 27 October 1894.

“The man who is frightened into religion has no religion at all.”⁴⁵

When Vivekananda preached equal respect for all communities, he clarified that this did not mean tolerance. On the contrary, he berated tolerance as ‘blasphemy’:

“Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live?”⁴⁶

And so,

“Our watchword, then, will be acceptance (and not toleration)... I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian’s church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law.”⁴⁷

He criticised the imposition of religious values of one community on others. At this time when religious fanatics have launched a violent campaign to force the vegetarian eating habits of the Brahmin minority on the entire people, especially Muslims, it is important to recall Vivekananda’s wise words:

“We leave everybody free to know, select, and follow whatever suits and helps him. Thus, for example, eating meat may help one, eating fruit another. Each is welcome to his own peculiarity, but he has no right to criticise the conduct of others... much less to insist that others should follow his way... The terrible mistake of religion was to interfere in social matters... What we want is

If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God—every being that wears a human form... Millions of rupees have been spent only that the temple doors at Varanasi or Vrindaban may play at opening and shutting all day long! Now the Lord is having His toilet, now He is taking His meals... And all this, while the Living God is dying for want of food, for want of education! The banias of Bombay are erecting hospitals for bugs—while they would do nothing for men even if they die!

– Volume 6, Epistles—Second Series, XLV, Brother Disciples, 1894.

that religion should not be a social reformer... What business had the priests to interfere (to the misery of millions of human beings) in every social matter?"⁴⁸

The Swami has nothing in common with Hindu fundamentalists. One of his disciples, Swami Akhandananda, was building an orphanage in Bengal. Vivekananda wrote to him saying:

"Admit boys of all religions—Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian..."

and further advised,

"... but never tamper with their religion. The only thing you will have to do is to make separate arrangements for their food etc."⁴⁹

Vivekananda stood firmly against religious fundamentalism, and expressed his deep anguish at the communal divisions, violence and bloodshed unleashed by fundamentalist forces on society. He said:

"Though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion."⁵⁰

Vivekananda said that this universe of ours, the universe of the senses, the rational, the intellectual, is bounded on both sides by the unknown. Man is not content with the known, with just eating and drinking. From the very beginning of humanity, man has struggled to understand the unknown, to inquire into the beyond, to transcend the limitation of the senses. That is the real reason for the origin of religion; religious thought is in man's very constitution.⁵¹ Therefore, if we want to tackle the ills created by religion, we will have to do so through religion itself. And so, in his earlier mentioned letter to Sarfaraz Husain, he wrote:

"We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran."⁵²

The radical views expressed in Vivekananda's letters undermine the

most fundamental tenets of the ideology of religious fundamentalists. It is only by distorting his teachings that the Sangh Parivar has been able to project Vivekananda as a Hindutva icon. For instance, Vivekananda scorns false glorification of the past, no different from the current attempts to find aeroplanes, cars and genetic science in ancient India. He laments:

“When, O Lord, shall our land be free from this eternal dwelling upon the past?”⁵³

Elsewhere, he wrote:

“There were many good things in the ancient times, but there were bad things too. The good things are to be retained, but the India that is to be, the future India, must be much greater than ancient India.”⁵⁴

The long and fierce debate that erupted when Dr. Shriram Lagoo wrote an article titled *Time to Retire God* is well-known. But what is not known is that Vivekananda had expressed a similar view in a letter to his monastic brothers of Alambazar Math on 27 April 1896. Saying that the previous Gods “have become rather old”, he declared:⁵⁵

Now we need a “new God, new religion, and new Vedas” because we want to build “a new India”.

Vivekananda’s views are completely antithetical to the fundamentalists who, through the RSS and its offshoots, pursue a vicious offensive to undermine the Indian Constitution, destroy the country’s secular fabric and convert India into a Hindu Rashtra. Three decades before the RSS’s formation, when the monster of religious nationalism was hardly born, this far-sighted Swami gave the call:

“All sect ideas and tribal or national ideas of religion must be given up. That each tribe or nation should have its own particular God and think that every other is wrong is a superstition that should belong to the past. All such ideas must be abandoned.”⁵⁶

Socialist Vivekananda

For three years from 1890 to 1893, Vivekananda roamed about the country travelling on foot, on horseback and by rail... smoking chillum with sweepers, staying amidst the poor in slum shanties, lodging with a

Muslim lawyer in Mount Abu, spending time with Tilak in Gaikwad Wada and with the Maharaja of Khetri as a guest in his palace. During these three years, he did not engage in religious studies. Instead, he tried to understand the conditions of the people. He expressed his deep distress in moving letters to his friends and disciples.

In a letter from New York on 19 November 1894, he wrote to his Madras disciples:

“I do not believe in a God, who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven! Pooh! India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of priestcraft is to be removed. No priestcraft, no social tyranny! More bread, more opportunity for everybody!”⁵⁷

Upliftment of the masses does not mean providing them only bread and education, but also the restoration of their dignity as human beings. Vivekananda was aware of this. In a letter to Haridas Viharidas Desai on 20 June 1894, he wrote:

“The real nation who live in cottages have forgotten their manhood, their individuality. Trodden under the foot of the Hindu, Mussulman, or Christian, they have come to think that they are born to be trodden under the foot of everybody who has money enough in his pocket. They are to be given back their lost individuality.”⁵⁸

But bringing the masses out of their dismal conditions, instilling confidence in them, giving them back their lost individuality and dignity, was not an easy task. Vivekananda expresses his anguish and frustration in a letter to Alasinga Perumal:

“I am no metaphysician, no philosopher, nay, no saint. But I am poor, I love the poor. I see what they call the poor of this

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.

– *Volume 5, Interviews, The Missionary Work of the First Hindu Sannyasin to the West, February 1897.*

country, and how many there are who feel for them!... Who feels there for the two hundred millions of men and women sunken for ever in poverty and ignorance? Where is the way out?"⁵⁹

After pondering for two more years, in a letter to Mary Hale (a close friend) on 1 November 1896, Vivekananda finally declares:⁶⁰

"I am a socialist."

It was 1896 and Vivekananda was 33 years old. This personal declaration was not made on a sudden whim, but after much experience and deep thought. Earlier he had spent three years travelling across India, intimately imbibing the people's poverty and backwardness. Then he had spent three years travelling in the Western world and while several things about the West impressed him, he also grasped the limitations of the liberal democracy in America and Europe:

On Liberation of Women

In a letter to Swami Ramakrishnananda, Vivekananda writes:

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing."

"In India there are two great evils. Trampling on the women, and grinding the poor through caste restrictions."

— *Volume 6, Epistles—Second Series, LXXV, 1895.*

In letters to his disciples from America, he says that America is prosperous, learned and energetic because its women are free.

"But why is it that we are slavish, miserable, and dead? The answer is obvious... Can you better the condition of your women? Then there will be hope for your well-being. Otherwise you will remain as backward as you are now."

—*Volume 5, Epistles—First Series, VI, 28 December 1893.*

"If I can raise a thousand such Madonnas, Incarnations of the Divine Mother, in our country before I die, I shall die in peace."³

—*Volume 6, Epistles—Second Series, XLVII, 25 September 1894.*

“The wealth and power of a country are in the hands of a few men who do not work but manipulate the work of the millions of human beings. By this power they can deluge the whole earth with blood. Religion and all things are under their feet; they rule and stand supreme. The Western world is governed by a handful of Shylocks. All those things that you hear about—constitutional government, freedom, liberty and parliaments—are but jokes.”⁶¹

After several years of contemplation, Vivekananda arrived at the conclusion that socialism was the answer to India’s poverty and backwardness. In his letter to Mary Hale, Vivekananda wrote of the strengths of socialism, that there would be equality in society, material conditions of the poor will improve, and there would be great spread of education. But while declaring himself a socialist, Vivekananda did not claim it to be a perfect system, for it could lead to a “lowering of culture”, and perhaps “extraordinary geniuses will be less”.⁶² Elsewhere,⁶³ he says that it may lead to the sacrifice of individual freedoms.*

Nevertheless, he wrote:⁶⁴

“I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system, but half a loaf is better than no bread. The other systems have been tried and found wanting. Let this one be tried...”

Vivekananda envisioned that socialism would come not just in India but throughout the world, and that in every country the working people, whom he called the ‘Shudras’, would build socialist movements and bring the new order into reality:

“A time will come when the Shudras of every country, with their inborn Shudra nature and habits—not becoming in essence Vaishya or Kshatriya, but remaining as Shudras—will gain absolute supremacy in every society. The first glow of the dawn of this new power has already begun to break slowly upon the Western world... Socialism, Anarchism, Nihilism, and other like sects are the vanguard of the social revolution that is to follow.”⁶⁵

* *The socialist experiments in Latin America in the early 21st century are setting these fears to rest. These countries are not only tackling poverty and unemployment, they also provide people education, healthcare and housing either free or at very cheap rates. Conditions are being created for people to develop their inherent potentialities. And most importantly, all this is happening democratically, through governments elected by the people.*

Indeed, it was the late 19th century, a time when powerful socialist movements were rising in several Western countries. Vivekananda hoped that these movements would soon sow their seeds in India:

“The lower classes... have worked so long uniformly like machines guided by human intelligence, and the clever educated section have taken the substantial part of the fruits of their labour. In every country this has been the case. But times have changed. The lower classes are gradually awakening to this fact and making a united front against this, determined to exact their legitimate dues. The masses of Europe and America have been the first to awaken and have already begun the fight. Signs of this awakening have shown themselves in India, too, as is evident from the number of strikes among the lower classes nowadays. The upper classes will no longer be able to repress the lower, try they ever so much.”⁶⁶

Vivekananda is the flagbearer of the movement against superstition and irrationalism, and for a socialist transformation of society. However, he had his own unique understanding of how a people’s movement is to be built in the country for achieving these aims. He says that this socialism will need to be combined with religion.⁶⁷ But at the same time, this religion of tomorrow will be based on reasoning; the same methods of investigation that are applied to science will also have to be applied to “the science of Religion”.⁶⁸

Like all socialists, Vivekananda had full faith in the masses. He believed that they, and not the upper classes, would transform society:

“Let New India arise... out of the peasants’ cottage, grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fisherman, the cobbler and the sweeper. Let her spring from the grocer’s shop, from beside the oven of the fritter-seller. Let her emanate from the factory, from marts, and from markets. Let her emerge from groves and forests, from hills and mountains.”⁶⁹

He placed faith in the masses because their sufferings had given them the fortitude, the energy and the patience to bring about this transformation:

“These common people have suffered oppression for thousands of years; suffered it without murmur, and as a result have got wonderful fortitude. They have suffered eternal misery, which has given them unflinching vitality. Living on a handful of grain,

they can convulse the world; give them only half a piece of bread, and the whole world will not be big enough to contain their energy; they are endowed with the inexhaustible vitality of a Raktabija*.”⁷⁰

While working for the upliftment of the Shudras and the poor in India, like every socialist, Vivekananda was not a narrow nationalist. He says he is a world citizen:

“I know my mission in life, and no chauvinism about me; I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that.”⁷¹

Vivekananda’s Call to the Youth

Vivekananda travelled across the country, calling the youth to sacrifice and work for uplifting the poor, as it was their duty to society:

So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them! I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all their money by grinding the poor, wretches, so long as they do not do anything for those two hundred millions who are now no better than hungry savages!

— *Volume 5, Epistles—First Series, XXV, Alasinga, 1894.*

“Who cares whether there is a heaven or a hell, who cares if there is a soul or not, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world, and it is full of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt. Forget yourselves; this is the first lesson to be learnt, whether you are a theist or an atheist, whether you are an agnostic or a Vedantist, a Christian or a Mohammedan.”⁷²

Of course, sacrificing one’s personal desires and aspirations and going out and serving the poor is not easy. There would be many who would oppose and ridicule. In a letter to one of his disciples, Vivekananda writes that passing through this test is important. It is the school that steels us and makes us strong:

“I have been ridiculed, distrusted, and have suffered for my sympathy for the very men who scoff and scorn. Well, my boy,

* *A demon, every drop of whose blood falling on the ground produced another demon like him.*

this is the school of misery, which is also the school for great souls and prophets for the cultivation of sympathy, of patience, and, above all, of an indomitable iron will which quakes not even if the universe be pulverised at our feet.”⁷³

But if we persist, despite whatever opposition, ultimately people will see the righteousness of our cause and accept it:

“Each work has to pass through these stages—ridicule, opposition, and then acceptance. Each man who thinks ahead of his time is sure to be misunderstood.”⁷⁴

Vivekananda was confident that the youth of India would accept the challenge and join him in thousands for this cause of serving mankind:

“I know for certain that India requires the sacrifice of her highest and best... A few young men have jumped in the breach, have sacrificed themselves. They are a few; we want a few thousands of such as they, and they will come.”⁷⁵

Vivekananda’s whole life was a saga of relentless effort to create awareness and mobilise the young men and women of India to sacrifice, go out among the masses, uplift them, organise them, and build a new society that would be free from all kinds of exploitation. He was confident about it:

“Believe me, from the shedding of our lifeblood will arise gigantic, heroic workers and warriors of God who will revolutionise the whole world.”⁷⁶

We must die, that is certain; let us die then for a good cause... The whole world is one; you are rated a very insignificant part of it, and therefore... you should serve your millions of brothers rather than aggrandise this little self.

– Volume 3, Lectures from Colombo to Almora, Sannyasa: Its Ideal and Practice, 19 June 1899.

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About Us: LOKAYAT

[Affiliated to SOCIALIST PARTY (INDIA)]

The Directive Principles of the Constitution direct the Indian State to orient its policy towards:

- building an egalitarian society; ensuring there is no concentration of wealth; ensuring adequate means of livelihood and raising the standard of living of the people; improving public healthcare; and making provision for free and equitable education for all children.

Unfortunately, the major political parties that dominate the Indian Parliament have decided to abandon this vision of the founding fathers of the nation. Ever since India's ruling classes decided to globalise the Indian economy in 1991, the country is being run solely for the profit maximisation of big foreign and Indian corporations. In connivance with the politicians—bureaucracy—police, giant corporations have launched a ferocious assault to dispossess the poor of their lands, forests, water and resources—to set up mining projects, giant infrastructural projects, build malls/golf courses/villas for the rich... Public sector corporations, including banks and insurance companies, are being privatised and handed over at throwaway prices to these scoundrels. Indian agriculture, on which 60 percent of the Indian people still depend for their livelihoods, is being deliberately strangulated—so that it can be taken over by giant agribusiness corporations. The consequence: 3 lakh farmers have committed suicide since the reforms began. Lakhs of small businesses have downed their shutters. Even essential services like drinking water, education, health and transport are being privatised and transformed into instruments for profiteering. The ration system designed to check speculation in prices of foodgrains is being dismantled. There are simply no decent jobs for the youth; probably nearly half the population is unemployed or underemployed.

As the economic system becomes more and more sick, the social and political system is also becoming more and more degenerate. All-pervasive corruption; continuation of the age-old caste-based social system because of which atrocities on Dalits take place almost daily; a communal political system that divides people in the name of religion and fills them with hatred against each other; a value system that promotes crass selfishness and unconcern and apathy for others—this is the reality of today.

The common people have not been silent spectators to this betrayal

of the Indian Constitution. People are coming together all over the country, getting organised, forming small-small groups and raising their voices in protest.

We must stop being sceptics, dream of a better future, believe that it is possible to change the world. Yes, *Another World is Possible!* But to make it a reality, we too must start our own small struggles. These will ultimately unite, like the small rivulets hurtling down the Himalayas which ultimately form the mighty Ganges, to transform and build a new society in accordance with the dreams of our nation's founding fathers. And so, we have started this forum, *Lokayat*.

The deepening economic crisis due to globalisation has been accompanied by a gradual growth of fascist forces in the country. With the coming to power of the BJP in 2014, not only is it implementing the globalisation policies of the previous government at an accelerated pace, it is also implementing a very regressive fascist social agenda, wherein it is attempting to not just promote backward, feudal, unscientific and irrational and even Brahminical values amongst the people and divide the country on communal lines, it is even indirectly attacking the very spirit of the Indian Constitution. To fight this vicious fascist offensive and provide a political alternative to the people, it is necessary for all progressive forces to unite. At the national level, Lokayat is affiliated with the Socialist Party (India). Unlike the mainstream political parties, Socialist Party (India) has consistently opposed globalisation and communalisation, and has not made any unprincipled compromises to somehow win political power.

We organise a wide range of activities / programs in Pune colleges, schools, city and slums, including:

- Seminars, talks, film screenings, song concerts, street campaigns, street plays, poster exhibitions, solidarity hunger fasts, rallies and dharnas on various issues of deep concern to common people, such as: rising inflation; privatisation of essential services; destruction of the environment and livelihoods of common people in the name of development; the growing fascist offensive against secularism and democracy; the rising number of atrocities on dalits; and so on.
- Lokayat's women's wing, named Abhivyakti, actively campaigns and organises programs on the various aspects of gender inequality and social roots of violence against women.

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Who was Swami Vivekananda?

Vivekananda said ...

- There is no such thing as fate.
- Rascally and wily priests teach the people all sorts of tomfoolery as the gist of Hinduism. Lord help the people from the Rakshashas in the shape of the Brahmins ...
- Do not believe scriptures or ancient doctrines blindly, just because they are being followed blindly by many.
- Caste is filling the atmosphere of India with its stench.... We do not touch the low castes, avoid their company. Are we men? ... The hereditary nature of caste is all gibberish....
- The ideal of all religions is the same—the attaining of liberty and cessation of misery.
- In this country, religious conversions have not taken place because of atrocities by Christians and Muslims, but because of atrocities by the upper castes.
- Religion should not interfere in social matters. People should be left free to follow what suits them. One may want to eat meat, another fruit. No one has the right to insist that others follow his way.
- A country cannot progress, if its women are not free.
- I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system ... The other systems have been tried and found wanting. Let this one be tried.
- So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, does not do anything for their upliftment!

