

A sage for all ages

By T R Jawahar

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In the passing away of Swami Dayananda Saraswati the nation has lost a revered Guru, who saw himself as a philosopher-teacher (as opposed to a *mada adhipathi*). This distinction is important to understand the great Guru and put his immeasurable contributions in proper perspective. For *Talk Media, News Today* and *Maalai Sudar* too, the death of this kind soul is a sad event as he had been an important guiding spirit to it. Personally too, it is a hour of huge sorrow for me, as I had interacted and travelled extensively with the Pujya Swamiji. I had interviewed him on many occasions over the last decade or so. Profuse, prolific and profound, the Swamiji left a lasting impact on me as I had the opportunity to see his greatness from close quarters. Here I present from our archives a personal tribute that I had paid to the Swamiji just after he had turned 80:

The canon of objectivity demands that journalism should not succumb to reverence. Of course, in practice this objectivity is either an alibi for an ivory-tower snootiness or is, well, highly subjective, for every scribe has his pet ideas and 'isms' and not only sees the world through those prisms but also paints his verbal pictures with those brushes. But still habits linger and you are reined-in by this in-built mechanism against praise. Also, with so much of it in full public flow, directed often at unworthy individuals, you don't feel like being part of the crowd or getting dissolved in the din. It is therefore, for me, a giant leap of faith to be breaking the barrier of cynicism, cross the threshold of professional inhibition, walk way beyond the prescribed 'safe-distance' and pay respects to a personality non-pareil. And in doing that, I have no doubts in my mind, I am the one who stands elevated.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam is a rare phenomenon. A Sanyasi

by a combination of fate and freewill, his sweep goes beyond the familiar practices and paraphernalia that one associates with an ascetic. A Guru by all means, he however is not a mutt head nor does he belong to any Order. He can best be described as a Teacher of Vedanta, a humble nomenclature he prefers but which does not fully reveal or reflect his awesome achievements beyond that field. Still, he is a sterling torchbearer of Bharatavarsha's millennias-old teaching tradition and his daily classes, explaining and expounding the oldest scriptures of mankind, the Vedas & the Bhagavad Gita, are a big draw. A master communicator and a multi-linguist, he can combine wit and wisdom with ease and make the listener comprehend the profound in his own pace and path: An enlightened guiding light that can at once dispel the darkness of ignorance and fear and fill you instead with knowledge and cheer. With Swamiji in the driver's seat, your spiritual sojourn is a happy and rewarding outing.

But to be honest, in all my association with Swamiji, Vedanta was the least that I imbibed. Such lofty matters require a trusting, serene mindset, a faculty that my profession precludes me from possessing. But if his spiritual teachings have barely scratched my thick skull, let alone sinking in, I have found perfect sync with his polemics on some practical issues of common concern. It was 1998 and the Pope was in India, spreading the word around for a huge 'harvest of faith'. His speech agitated me personally and also raised my professional hackles: After all, freedom of religion also means freedom to practice one's own religion without interference but here was a rank foreigner with no *locus standi*, brazenly intruding on that right and openly asking everyone to defect. I promptly put out a protest in my columns and prayed for a 'crop failure'. But the hurt remained and questions loomed:

Should a liberal person, a journo at that, oppose conversions? Does religious freedom include right to convert others? This and many more. To me, the truth was obvious, as revealed by my spontaneous aversion to the Pope's call, but it defied articulation and worse, acceptance, at least in the mainstream. This was when the Swamiji came out with stunning arguments against religious conversions. His declaration that conversion 'tantamounted to violence', at one stroke, dismissed all self-doubt and actually emboldened me to make it a matter of conviction, personal, professional and patriotic. And I was just one in a crowd of many who were wallowing in the same self-defeating muck of foolish tolerance of the intolerant and coy acquiescence to their mischiefs.

And the impact was not confined to individuals like me but created world-wide ripples. For the first time, Om challenged Rome in the language it understood and the message has truly gone home. Shorn of the semantic sophistry and the secular smokescreen, conversions were shown up for what they are: cheap marketing tricks to enlarge the flock and through that, enhance political control. While it is puerile to believe that the attempts to convert, which is deemed a religious calling by expansionist, exclusivist faiths and their followers, will abate, Swamiji has certainly legitimised the opposition to it, lent the issue voice and vocabulary, reversed the debate and brought it to the global intellectual table. His formulation that conversion is an assault on human rights is a master-stroke that gives a perspective in the modern idiom and no surprise therefore that even the UN has taken note of it. But better still, several 'pagan' faiths world over which were wiped out by the onslaught of evangelising, aggressive religions, are now trying to stage a comeback and reclaim their lost, rightful place, in history and geography too. In that, Swamiji's campaign can be compared to Swami Vivekananda's US Parliament of Religions coup last century.!

But to dub Swamiji as a mere agitationist against conversions is to trivialise his real worth. His opposition flowed from a larger dharmic worldview that Eashwara can be attained by many ways by any seeker and He

has no 'particular address nor any sole franchisee'. Swamiji's mantra: 'There is not one god; there is only God!' It is with this unassailable wisdom that he unapologetically convinced an influential Jewish forum in Israel recently that 'Hindus were not idolators but saw, and therefore, worshipped divinity in all forms'. To the familiar question on everyone's lips 'Should I believe in God', Swamiji's nonchalant reply always is 'Not unless you want to lend him five hundred rupees!' For Swamiji, the almighty is not a matter of belief, but understanding. Reason why he teaches and others listen!

While Swamiji is at the vanguard in protecting and promoting Sanatana Dharma, his concern for the 'dharmi' too is abiding. This spiritual master is a man 'for' the world too: For him, service to society also is Eashwara and the organisations he has spawned, like Aim for Seva, render stupendous services in the fields of education, healthcare, vocational training, women's emancipation, tribal welfare etc. The Acharya Sabha that he launched a few years back seeks to bring various sampradayas on a single platform on issues concerning the Hindu society and faith. This sabha, for instance, is in the forefront of a movement to extricate temples from the grip of a 'secular' State. He is the moving spirit behind many such auspicious ventures and physically moves around a lot too. He is a ceaseless globe-trotter and has ashrams and audiences in Bharath and beyond. But he relishes Rishikesh on the banks of the Ganga the most.

Swamiji recently turned 80 and was feted. For a spiritualist on an eternal quest, Age 80 is a minor mortal milestone. But for the legions of his admirers and disciples it was an occasion for rendering gurudakshina, not of material things, but as an emotional acknowledgement of a man whose message lent meaning to their lives. Sages like him have always sustained and enriched this ancient land. They carry in their soul the undying torch of truth and the undrying spring of compassion. Blessed are those, 'objective' journos included, who come into their orbit!

Shri Gurubyo Namaha!