Hail Hindu Heroes!
Category : November 1999
Published by Anonymous on Nov. 01, 1999

INSIGHT

Hail Hindu Heroes!

Everyone needs a hero to look up to and emulate and India has ample champions, world-renowned figures of virtue, strength and perserverance

Beginning two centuries ago, there arose throughout India a retinue of talented, high-souled and dedicated men and women who were great by any standard in the history of humankind. They consecrated their life and works to the resurrection of their motherland. They lit the lamp of liberty, articulated a new era, safeguarded India's individuality and spirituality, strengthened her people's intentions and preserved their way of life. These are some of the contemporary heroes of Hinduism. Here we briefly recount their stories and achievements, while artist Sabaji Bhagwan Polaji of Mumbai provides the portraiture.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1825-1883): "Back to the Vedas." This was the clarion call of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, religious leader, social reformer, gifted speaker and prolific writer. Swamiji founded the now global fellowship of the Arya Samaj. His writings include commentaries on the Rig, Yajur and Sama Vedas, an encyclopedic work on Hinduism called Satyartha Prakash, a book of prayers and a work on Sanskrit grammar. Swami rejected idol worship and

polytheism. He fought against superstitions, child-marriage, the hereditary caste system and forced widowhood. He advocated women's education, a single national language and the study of Sanskrit.

Born in 1825 in Kathiawar (now in Rajkot district of Gujarat), Mulshankar, as Swami Dayananda was known as a boy, left his home at the age of 21. He wandered the country for 20 years and learned the Vedas from scholars. His Guru, Virajanand of Mathura, the blind saint with a giant intellect, gave him his mission. Swamiji passed away at Ajmer on October 30, 1883, having been poisoned.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886): There is one principle of pure consciousness. It is both personal and impersonal. It can be reached through the path of love, knowledge and selfless action. Man should aim at Self realization, and morality is the foundation of spiritual perfection. This, in essence, is the teaching of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa.

Born at Kamarpukur village of West Bengal, on February 18, 1836, Gadadhar, as he was known as a youth, showed spiritual inclinations even in his boyhood. He had an artistic temperament and a beautiful voice. His brother took him to Calcutta when he was 20 and made him a priest at the Kali Temple at Dakshineshwar. Ramakrishna not only had visions of the Supreme Goddess but had practical training in tantra. His whole life was an uninterrupted contemplation of God. Through his profound spiritual realizations, he demonstrated the reality of God and restored faith in religion for many. People flocked

to him from far and near, seekers of truth of all races, creeds and castes. His small room in the Dakshineswar temple garden on the outskirts of the city of Calcutta became a veritable parliament of religions. The teachings of Ramakrishna were spread all over the world by his foremost disciple, Swami Vivekananda.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): Poet, novelist, critic, philosopher, nationalist and educationist, Tagore is the greatest of modern Bengali writers and a treasure of Indian literature. Tagore gave exquisite expression to the joy of being one with the river and the mountain, the sky and the stars, the grass and the flowers. His poetry exalts nature and mysticism. His was an aesthetic approach to life and art, but his faith was anchored deep in the Brahman of the Upanishads. Tagore wrote more than 1,000 poems and 2,000 songs, besides novels, short stories, plays and essays. He was a musician of the highest order and a painter of delicate sensitivity. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his collection of poems entitled Gitanjali.

Born to affluence of Devendra Nath Tagore and Sharada Devi in Calcutta, Tagore was educated mostly at home. He studied for a while at the University College, London, in 1878. He was married to Mrinalini in 1883. He founded Shanti Niketan in 1901, a school which later became famous as Vishwa Bharati, or World University. Tagore fervently protested the partition of Bengal (1905). His song Jana Gana Mana is the National Anthem of India.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902): As the foremost disciple of

Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda not only spread the teachings of his master but carried the message of Vedanta to the West. He is hailed as a "bridge-builder between East and West." He consecrated his own life to the moral and spiritual upliftment of his nation and humanity.

Born on January 12, 1863, in Calcutta, of Shri Vishwanatha Datta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi, Narendranath Datta, as Swamiji was called, had his early education at home. He later graduated in arts and law. A self-proclaimed rationalist and agnostic, Narendranath came under the influence of Ramakrishna almost by chance, and he was immediately captivated by the unqualified spirituality of Ramakrishna. He took the name Swami Vivekananda as a sannyasin before departing for America. Vivekananda became famous after addressing the Parliament of Religions on September 11, 1893 in Chicago, USA. The brilliant light that was Swamiji went out on July 4, 1902, when he had just turned 39. He is the one of the greatest modern interpreters and promoters of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948): Mahatma Gandhi is looked upon as the "Father of the Nation" in India. He had an overwhelming influence on the people in the country during his lifetime. Albert Einstein hailed Gandhi as: "A man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of a simple human being, and thus at all times has risen superior. Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." Gandhi demonstrated that the essential strength of man is spiritual. Injustice and tyranny should be fought with truth and nonviolence as the guiding principles. Gandhi roused the

masses of India into action for winning freedom from foreign rule.

Born on October 2, 1869, in Gujarat, Gandhi had his education in India and England. He left for South Africa in 1893 to argue in a civil suit. Moved by the plight of Indian settlers, Gandhi demonstrated the efficacy of his unique strategy--satyagraha--in fighting for their legitimate rights. Returning to India in 1915, Gandhi launched a series of movements against the British rule, including noncooperation, civil disobedience and the Quit India Movement in 1942. He was sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. On January 30, 1948, the apostle of peace and nonviolence fell to an assassin's bullets.

Mahayogi Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950): One of the greatest pioneers of the Indian Renaissance, Sri Aurobindo was educated in England and was proficient in Greek, Latin and English. Yet there was no greater or more brilliant exponent of Indian culture from the point of view of the Vedic spiritual tradition. He was no philosopher content with weaving verbal rhetoric. He was a yogi, an integrated personality whose life was a sadhana towards realizing the Self divine. He has been described as the "Poet of Patriotism" and the "Prophet of Indian Nationalism." Aurobindo envisaged the emergence of a superman, the truth-conscious being, one who has realized the Divinity within himself as the goal of human evolution.

Born on August 15, 1872, Aurobindo attended schools in England from the age of seven. He returned to India in 1893, taught French and became Professor of English at the Baroda

State College. He was in Baroda for 13 years. Aurobindo was drawn into politics in 1905 when Bengal was partitioned. He was associated with the Bengali daily Yugantar and the English daily Bande Mataram. He followed Tilak in his political thinking, and was with the extremists at the Surat session of the Congress in 1907. Aurobindo was arrested in 1908 for revolutionary activity and acquitted after one year. He became a spiritual aspirant during his imprisonment and chose to pursue a spiritual mission. He went to Pondicherry and stayed on there till his Mahasamadhi on December 5, 1950. He wrote copiously in his inimitable, elevated literary style.

Sadhu T.L. Vaswani (1879-1966): An eminent educationist, great social reformer, philosopher and a man of God, Thanwardas Lilaram Vaswani lived a life of selfless service. Spiritually inclined from his childhood, he called upon youth to be dedicated to the service of the Motherland with faith in God. He considered character-building to be the essential prerequisite for nation-building. He organized many educational organizations and youth centers for promoting education and inculcation of ethical and spiritual values.

Vaswani was born in Hyderabad, Sind, on November 25, 1879. His father was well versed in Persian and knowledgeable about the lives of the Sufis. A brilliant student, Vaswani served as professor and principal in various colleges during 1903. He resigned his principalship in 1919 and decided to devote the rest of his life to the service of his motherland. Vaswani, a great orator, was one of the earliest supporters of Gandhi's noncooperation movement.

Returning to Hyderabad, in 1929 he started an organization called "Sakhi Sat-Sang," devoted to women's causes. He presided over a number of conferences and meetings connected with humanitarianism, religion and peace during the third and the fourth decades of the century. Following partition, Vaswani settled in Pune in 1949 and set up a number of educational institutions. He has been hailed as "a thinker and a revealer of the deep truth of the spirit." He passed away on June 16, 1966, in Pune. A 10-foot statue of Sadhu T.L. Vaswani stands before the Pune Railway Station. In 1969, the government of India brought out a postal stamp in memory of him.

Bhagavan Ramana (1879-1950): Ramana Maharshi was born on December 29, 1879, at Tiruchuli, a small town near Madurai, in South India, as the son of Sundaram Aiyar, a middle-class brahmin lawyer, and his wife Alagammal. The Maharshi was named Venkataraman, and after his elementary education at Tiruchuli, he was sent to Madurai for schooling. He was living in his uncle's home then. It was there, when he was 17, that he had a great spiritual experience in a confrontation with death. He felt that he was to die just then, and his conscious mind was driven inwards by the question "Who is this 'I' who is dying?" From the innermost recesses of his being the realization came: "I am the soul (Atma or Self), not the body." From that time onward, he dwelt in the radiance of the spirit. The fear of death left him forever.

On August 29, 1896 he left his family in Madurai and ventured to Tiruvannamalai, where he remained until his departure from this world in 1950. Beginning in 1922, an ashram grew up around him at the foot of the hill. People from all walks of life

went to the sage and invariably experienced profound peace as well as gaining practical solutions to their problems. Though the Maharshi was ever ready to explain doctrinal or philosophical matters, it was mainly his very presence that was his greatest blessing to devotees. The Maharshi once explained to a visitor, "Bhagavan's teaching is an expression of his own experience and realization." The Maharshi attained Mahasamadhi on Friday, April 14, 1950.

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888): Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, one of the three early recipients of the Bharat Ratna Award, was a great philosopher, educationist and humanist. He was the President of India during 1962 and was hailed as the philosopher-king of Plato's conception. He explained the ancient wisdom of the Indian sages in terms intelligible to the modern mind. Radhakrishnan's specific contribution to thought consists of his philosophy of religion and idealist view of life. Additionally, he gave much impetus to the comparative study of religions. Radhakrishnan offered a reasoned defence of religion. He was an exceptional writer and speaker, in a style that was dignified and impressive. His intellect was encyclopedic. Science and religion, literature and the fine arts, all these he elucidated with rare insight.

Born in Tiruttani, Tamil Nadu, in September, 1888, Radhakrishnan had his education at Tiruttani, Tirupati, Vellore and Chennai. He started his career as a lecturer and moved to Mysore and Calcutta to occupy prestigious professorial chairs. He was Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford during 1936-1939. Radhakrishnan held the offices of Indian Ambassador to Russia, 1949-1952, Vice President of the Indian Union, 1952-1962, and President of India, 1962-1967.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982): A scholar and a saint, Acharya Vinoba Bhave was a beacon of hope and solace to millions in India and abroad. He was Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual successor. Vinoba was born in a village in Maharashtra's Kolaba district on September 11, 1895. As a youth, he was drawn to Gandhi and his unique "Weaponless War" for India's freedom. Like the Mahatma, Vinoba was also ahead of his time. His bhoodan (gift of land), sampattidan (gift of wealth), jeevadan (gift of life) and other movements are logical extensions of Gandhi's programs of national reconstruction. Believing in communal amity, he abolished every trace of untouchability from his heart. In order to understand his Muslim neighbors, he studied the Koran in the original Arabic for one year. His padayatra (foot journey), a part of his bhoodan movement, was a demonstration of the Gandhian doctrine of trusteeship.

Of the many teachings of the Gita which Vinoba highlighted in his talks, one of the most important was the role of self-help. "The Gita is prepared to go to the lowest, the weakest and the least cultured of men. And it goes to him not to keep him where he is, but to grasp him by the hand and lift him up. The Gita wishes that man should make his action pure and attain the highest state." Vinobaji passed away at Paunar on November 17, 1982. He was posthumously honored with the Bharat Ratna Award in 1984.

Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986): She is the resuscitator of the Indian classical dance, bharata natyam, which was almost given up in the early decades of the present century. Rukmini Devi Arundale returned the dance to respectability. She looked upon dance not as mere entertainment but as a means of

spiritual transformation, and she brought the spirit of the temple to the stage.

Born in an orthodox brahmin family, she later became a member of the Theosophical Society. Her taking up dance was a significant challenge. Bharata natyam was then learned and performed in the temples by Devadasis (women servants of God) who were looked down upon by society. Rukmini Devi had to struggle against this convention and its stigma. She created a stir in the conservative society of Chennai in the twenties by marrying George Arundale, an educationist and one of the leaders of the Theosophical movement in South India. She trained in music and dance under great masters. With a view to fostering these arts and preserving them in their pristine purity, she founded the Kalakshetra (Temple of Arts) in Madras. The institution today is world renowned.

Rukmini Devi was a member of the Rajya Sabha. She was an ardent champion of vegetarianism and carried on a crusade against ritual animal slaughter. She was even proposed as a nominee for the presidentship of India in 1977.

From the book ARCHITECTS AND BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, USA.Â© 1997.
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