

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, THE MASTER STORY - TELLER

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda had used stories to explain complex ideas and had ensured that they reach the people in simple form. An analysis of a sample selection of his stories and the themes they explore is done in this paper.

Key words: Stories, Dissemination of ideas, Religion, Values, Charity

Swami Vivekananda, the Master Story-teller

Humans can relate much more closely to stories than events. It helps in personalizing and visualizing the concepts dealt with. Storytelling is a part of everyone's experience. Storytelling dates back to the time immemorial. There are evidences of cavemen depicting their hunts for fellow cavemen in the form of pictures which is a form of storytelling. Before any sort of writing or printing was invented, story-telling was the way the family traditions, histories, lessons, religion, travels, events and many other things were passed down through the ages.

Stories are not simply for entertainment purposes. Some stories encourage a subtle change in routine while others incite people to march the streets demanding change. Some become legends cemented in time and remain in the hearts of the people for ever. It does not matter to whom the stories are told, to a global, local or familial audience. Some stories are better told in solitude. Irrespective of who is listening our lives are being lived in a storied world.

The roles stories play are multi various. Stories have been used, generally, to convey morals and note-worthy ideas to commoners. They have served as a medium for clarifying complex philosophies and for carrying abstract concepts to people of limited understanding. They have served as sugar coats on ideas that are difficult to accept and have an added advantage of being colorful and enticing. On the other hand, they have also served as entertaining and educative tools for small kids.

Considering the above facts, it is no wonder that all the religions have used stories to forward their precepts and to disseminate their values. Hinduism especially abounds in stories inside the framework of its Puranas and Ithihaasas, like Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Bhagavatha and such. These mythological stories have religious background. Added to these stories, India has been the cradle of scores of social stories too which have been used by speakers and writers as vehicles to spread their ideas across.

Swami Vivekananda was one of the learned and wise men who had possessed a mastery over story-telling. His technique of story-telling is an example of effective clarification of ideas and forceful embedment of the ideas in the minds of people effortlessly.

The finest example of his story telling skills is the story that he narrates in the Parliament of Religions explaining the reason for the variance between the religions. In the August assembly of religious practitioners, he, subtly and simply, makes his opinions on the broadmindedness of the gathered people understood with the famous stories of the frogs. It goes thus:

A frog lived in a well. It had lived there for a long time. It was born there and brought up there, and yet was a little, small frog. Of course the evolutionists were not there then to tell us whether the frog lost its eyes or not, but, for our story's sake, we must take it for granted that it had its eyes, and that it every day cleansed the water of all the worms and bacilli that lived in it with an energy that would do credit to our modern bacteriologists. In this way it went on and became a little sleek and fat. Well, one day another frog that lived in the sea came and fell into the well.

“Where are you from?”

“I am from the sea.”

“The sea! How big is that? Is it as big as my well?” and he took a leap from one side of the well to the other.

“My friend,” said the frog of the sea, “how do you compare the sea with your little well?”

Then the frog took another leap and asked, “Is your sea so big?”

“What nonsense you speak, to compare the sea with your well!”

“Well, then,” said the frog of the well, “nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out.”

That has been the difficulty all the while.

I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world. (6)

The tale brings out the truth about the wholly self centered mindset of people. It is to Swami's credit that he does not spare himself or people of his religion too. He stresses the need of the people to develop a broad mind and the importance of accepting the merits of other religions.

Swami talks about the dangers of fanaticism in his lecture titled ‘We Help Ourselves, Not the World’.

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. (5)

He explains the danger of fanaticism with a story. Though the story is well known, Swami Vivekananda gives it a different slant and a novel meaning. The story is that of a man, a ghost and a dog's tail. There is a poor man who wants some money and thinks that if he could get hold of a ghost, he might command it to bring money. He is very anxious to get hold of a ghost. He goes about searching for a man who would give him a ghost and at last finds a sage with great powers, and beseeches his help. After repetitive requests, the sage is disgusted, and says, “Take this charm, repeat this magic word and a ghost will come, and whatever you say to him he will do. But beware; they are terrible beings, and must be kept continually busy. If you fail to give him work, he will take your life.” The man replies that it is easy and that he can give the ghost work for all his life. The ghost appears and tells him that it will do everything for the

man but will kill him if it is left without work. The man asks it to build a house, bring money and build a city after destroying a forest and so on. All the work is done instantly. Now the man begins to get frightened and thinks he could give it nothing more to do. So he runs and reaches the sage, and says, “Oh, sir, protect my life!” He narrates everything to the sage and begs him to save his life. The sage promises to find a way out and instructs him to cut the tail off of a dog and give it to the ghost to straighten out. The man does so. The ghost takes it and slowly and carefully straightens it out, but as soon as it lets the tail go, it instantly curls up again. This gets repeated several times. So it goes on for days and days, until he is exhausted. The story continues with the ghost speaking thus:

I was never in such trouble before in my life. I am an old veteran ghost, but never before was I in such trouble.” “I will make a compromise with you,” he said to the man, “you let me off and I will let you keep all I have given you and will promise not to harm you.” The man was much pleased, and accepted the offer gladly. (66)

Commenting on the story, Swami says that one must first know how to work without attachment. When one knows that this world is like a dog's curly tail and will never get straightened, one shall not become a fanatic. If there were no fanaticism in the world, it would make much more progress than it does now.

The apparently funny story has, hidden in it, the deep message about the futility of the tasks man undertakes in changing the world around him. Stressing on the message of ‘non-attachment’ to the worldly things, Swami preaches that an ideal Karma yogi works without any expectation on the outcome. “Be grateful to the man you help, think of him as God. Is it not a great privilege to be allowed to worship God by helping our fellow men? If we were really unattached, we should escape all this pain of vain expectation, and could cheerfully do good work in the world.” (65)

Swami also deals with the age old question of comparative merits of grahastha, and sanyaasa system, not in the rhetoric manner but in the form of a story. The ideal and the significance of each of the systems are illustrated in the story.

The story talks of a king who wants to find out who is better, a sanyaasi (hermit) or a grahastha (householder). He questions many. Some assert that the Sannyasin is the greater, upon which the king demands that they should prove their assertion. The king demands proof from others also who opine that grahasthas are great. At last there comes a young Sannyasin, and the king inquires the same of him also. The Sanyaasin answers that each is equally great in his place. The king naturally asks for proof. The Sannyasin promises to prove it but asks the king to first come and live as he does for a few days. The king consents and follows the Sannyasin. They come to a great kingdom. In the capital of that kingdom, a swayamvara ceremony is going on wherein the princess of the kingdom gets to choose her husband by garlanding the man she likes best from the assembled group of princes.

The princess of the country to which our king and the Sannyasin had come is having one of these interesting ceremonies. The idea of this princess is to marry the most handsome man, but she cannot find the right one to please her. The princess comes in on a throne and goes around the hall repeatedly but is still unable to find the man. Just then a young Sannyasin, handsome ‘as if the sun had come down to the earth’ comes there and stands in a corner. The princess, having found a handsome man, garlands him. The young Sannyasin seizes the garland and throws it off, exclaiming that it is nonsense and that he, a Sannyasin, has nothing to do with marriage. The king of the kingdom promises him the kingdom and the by-now angry Sanyaasin walks out of

the place. The princess, head over heels in love with the Sanyaasin, follows him into the forest. The other Sannyasin, who had brought the king, follows the pair. The young Sannyasin who has refused to marry the princess walks out into the country for several miles and comes to a forest followed by the three people. After trying for a long time to find him, the princess sits down under a tree and begins to weep, for she does not know the way out. The king and Sanyaasin promise to show her the way out the following day. They decide to spend the night under a tree. Now a little bird and his wife and their three little ones live on that tree, in a nest. This little bird looks down and sees the three people under the tree and says to his wife that they need to help the guests keep warm. So he flows away, gets a bit of burning firewood in his beak and drops it before the guests, to which they add fuel and make a blazing fire. But the little bird is not satisfied. He tells his wife that it is the duty of a householder to feed the guests. So he plunges into the midst of the fire and perishes. The guests see him falling and try to save him, but he is too quick for them. The little bird's wife then falls into the fire saying that one bird's body is not enough for three people and that it is a wife's duty to see that her husband's efforts do not go in vain. Then the three baby-birds seeing what was done and understanding that there was still not enough food for the three guests, fall into the fire too. The guests are amazed and pass the night without food and in the morning the king and the Sannyasin show the princess the way back to her father. Swami finishes this beautiful story thus:

Then the Sannyasin said to the king, "King, you have seen that each is great in his own place. If you want to live in the world, live like those birds, ready at any moment to sacrifice yourself for others. If you want to renounce the world, be like that young man to whom the most beautiful woman and a kingdom were as nothing. If you want to be a householder, hold your life a sacrifice for the welfare of others; and if you choose the life of renunciation, do not even look at beauty and money and power. Each is great in his own place, but the duty of the one is not the duty of the other. (42)

All the religions have always merited themselves on the concept of Charity. Hinduism also expounds on the attributes of Charity, especially of the self- sacrifice kind. Swami Vivekananda speaks of this in his 'The Secret of work' in the form of a moving story. His idea of complete self-sacrifice is illustrated very clearly in the story.

After the battle of Kurukshetra the five Pândava brothers perform a great sacrifice and give very large gifts to the poor. All people express their amazement at the greatness and richness of the sacrifice, and say that such a sacrifice has never been seen before. But, after the ceremony, there comes a little mongoose, half of whose body is golden, and the other half brown. He begins to roll on the floor of the sacrificial hall. He finally comments to those around him that they are all liars and that what had been performed had not been a sacrifice at all. The people are shocked. They exclaim, "You say this is no sacrifice; do you not know how money and jewels were poured out to the poor and every one became rich and happy? This was the most wonderful sacrifice any man ever performed."(52). But the mongoose refutes the claim telling a story of supreme self- sacrifice.

There was once a little village, and in it there dwelt a poor Brahmin with his wife, his son, and his son's wife. They were very poor and lived on small gifts made to them for preaching and teaching. There came in that land a three years' famine, and the poor Brahmin suffered more than ever. At last when the family had starved for days, the father brought home one

morning a little barley flour, which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and he divided it into four parts, one for each member of the family. They prepared it for their meal, and just as they were about to eat, there was a knock at the door. The father opened it, and there stood a guest. (52)

Swami explains the concept of hospitality in this story. It is an explanation of the maxim 'Aditi devho bhava'. He tells that in India a guest is a sacred person and that he is as a god for the time being, and will be treated as such. The story follows thus:

So the poor Brahmin said, 'Come in, sir; you are welcome,' He set before the guest his own portion of the food, which the guest quickly ate and said, 'Oh, sir, you have killed me; I have been starving for ten days, and this little bit has but increased my hunger.' Then the wife said to her husband, 'Give him my share,' but the husband said, 'Not so.' The wife however insisted, saying, 'Here is a poor man, and it is our duty as householders to see that he is fed, and it is my duty as a wife to give him my portion, seeing that you have no more to offer him.' Then she gave her share to the guest, which he ate, and said he was still burning with hunger. So the son said, 'Take my portion also; it is the duty of a son to help his father to fulfill his obligations.' The guest ate that, but remained still unsatisfied; so the son's wife gave him her portion also. That was sufficient, and the guest departed, blessing them. That night those four people died of starvation. A few granules of that flour had fallen on the floor; and when I rolled my body on them, half of it became golden, as you see. Since then I have been travelling all over the world, hoping to find another sacrifice like that, but nowhere have I found one; nowhere else has the other half of my body been turned into gold. That is why I say this is no sacrifice. (53)

Swami Vivekananda stresses on the fact that one serves the whole mankind when one serves individuals. When a poor person with no means gives, that act has no equivalent in terms of value. The act becomes a direct service to God. The other means to reach God is to do your duties properly. One need not go in search of God in lieu of one's duties. Irrespective of one's profession, one can seek God by serving others and performing duties loyally. He has a very potent story expressing this principle.

A young Sannyâsin goes to a forest; there he meditates, worships, and practices Yoga for a long time. After years of hard work and practice, one day, as he is sitting under a tree, some dry leaves fall upon his head. He looks up and sees a crow and a crane fighting on the top of the tree. This makes him indignant. He is angry with them for throwing the leaves on his head. He angrily glances at them. A flash of fire goes out of his head and as a result of his yogic power, the birds are burnt to ashes. Now this makes the Sannyasin very happy, this development of power. After a time he has to go to the town to beg his bread. He goes, stands at a door, and asks for food. A voice comes from inside the house asking him to wait. The young man who has acquired a very high opinion of himself thinks that the woman is not aware of his power and dares to make him wait. While he is thinking thus the voice comes again: "Boy, don't be thinking too much of yourself. Here is neither crow nor crane." At that he is astonished. At last the woman comes, and he falls at her feet and asks her how she knew about the crane and crow. She says thus:

My boy, I do not know your Yoga or your practices. I am a common everyday woman. I made you wait because my husband is ill, and I was

nursing him. All my life I have struggled to do my duty. When I was unmarried, I did my duty to my parents; now that I am married, I do my duty to my husband; that is all the Yoga I practice. But by doing my duty I have become illumined; thus I could read your thoughts and know what you had done in the forest. If you want to know something higher than this, go to the market of such and such a town where you will find a Vyâdha (The lowest class of people in India who used to live as hunters and butchers.) who will tell you something that you will be very glad to learn. (58)

The Sannyasin wonders why he should go to the town and that to a Vyadha. But after what he has seen, his mind has opened a little and so he goes. Near the town, he finds the market and a big fat Vyadha cutting meat with big knives, talking and bargaining with different people. The young man is flabbergasted and wonders what he is going to learn from the butcher. In the meantime the butcher looks up and asks if the lady has sent him there. He further asks him to take a seat until he has done his business. The Sannyasin is surprised and takes his seat. The man goes on with his work, and after he has finished, invites the Sannyasin home. On reaching home the Vyadha asks him to wait again and goes into his home. He then washes his old father and mother, feeds them, and does all he could to please them, after which he comes to the Sannyasin. The Sannyasin asks him a few questions about soul and about God, and the Vyadha gives him a lecture. When the Vyadha finishes his teaching, the Sannyasin feels astonished and is confused. The conversation proceeds with the Sannyasin questioning the Vyadha thus:

He said, “Why are you in that body? With such knowledge as yours why are you in a Vyadha's body, and doing such filthy, ugly work?” “My son,” replied the Vyadha, “no duty is ugly, no duty is impure. My birth placed me in these circumstances and environments. In my boyhood I learnt the trade; I am unattached, and I try to do my duty well. I try to do my duty as a householder, and I try to do all I can to make my father and mother happy. I neither know your Yoga, nor have I become a Sannyasin, nor did I go out of the world into a forest; nevertheless, all that you have heard and seen has come to me through the unattached doing of the duty which belongs to my position.”(59)

The stories given above are just samples from the collection of stories narrated by Swami. The ideas that Swami Vivekananda propounds are deep and powerful. The assimilation of these becomes easier when they are given to the people in a lighter manner in the form of stories, the evergreen vessels of wisdom. This is to the merit of Swami Vivekananda and his story telling ability.

Work Cited

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