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**REVISITING
NATIVE
WISDOM**

**SWAMI VIVEKANANDA
A ROLE MODEL OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

Dr. V. Kulandaiswamy

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LEADERSHIP

A leader is the linking pin that connects the two different human entities: the individual and the collective. The leadership role manifests when the individual self extends its domain to a group/collective self and the task of deciding or shaping the destiny or leading the course of joint/collective action is entrusted to an individual. As such leadership is a ubiquitous social institution which plays a catalytic role in mobilization, organization and institutionalization of people towards a common goal.

Earlier theories and perceptions placed a leader on a higher pedestal, which is characterized as:

- ✓ Hierarchical ordering of positions
- ✓ Empowerment with authority
- ✓ Entitled to expect compliance
- ✓ Endowed with superior knowledge

A fundamental change took place in this approach to leadership, when democratic, participative approach to leadership emerged and acceptance theory was advocated. Democratization of social and political system brought about a paradigm change in the leadership style. Leadership is viewed more as a heterarchical, group or team function, and as a reflection of collective will than the whims and fancies of an individual however powerful or important he or she may be.

An entirely new perception of leadership emerged in recent times, which wields a powerful influence on the understanding of the concept of leadership in the corporate and social sector is the servant leadership. The characteristics of such leadership is outlined as one that evolves from the role oneself plays as a servant, inspired by vision, guided by values and influenced by empathy exercising persuasive power and willingness to listen.

“Servant leaders are functionally superior because they are close to the ground-they hear things, see things, know things and their intuitive thinking is exceptional. Because of this they are dependable and trusted ” (Robert Greenleaf, *Servant as Leader* p-24).

Servant leader is a servant first; he primarily serves and leads secondarily. He enables the served to grow as individuals, and “primary means of his service is empowerment ” (Scott Peck, *A World Waiting To Be Born* p -266). It is an ideal leadership model for the unprivileged common people. The servant leader derives the authority from the people whom one leads.

“A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to and is proportion to the clearly evident stature of the leader”(Robert Green-Leaf *Ibid* p-3)

Robert Greenleaf places faith on this kind of leadership as instrument of development.

“May hope for the future rests in part on my belief that among the legions of deprived and unsophisticated people are many true servants who will lead, and most of them can learn to discriminate among those who presume to serve them and identify the true servants whom they will follow”. (*Ibid* p-6)

THE QUALITY OF CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP

The post independent, political democracy and state sponsored development in India has resulted in creation of a mammoth, bureaucratic machinery and a political system, bereft of any personal values and social ethics. There has been a serious erosion of values in public life. The education system has produced technocrats, administrators and businessmen who are by and large self-centered and lacked social concern. “After winning freedom the scramble for power resulted in lowering of national character to such an extent that our standards of social conduct and administration cannot be now considered as high”(T.S.Aavinashilingam, *Education Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda-1964,p-77*) Perhaps the quality of public life and leadership is at its lowest level in the present day India.

While Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) started publishing his thoughts on '*Servant Leadership*' since 1970, one generation before, a thought current swept across India as well as the world; the call for renunciation and service echoed everywhere followed by concrete action plan for the emancipation of oppressed and downtrodden. The fountain head of such thought revolution is none other than Swami Vivekananda (1836-1902). With his indomitable spirit and extraordinary courage and abundant love for humanity, Swamiji is a rare kind of spiritual leader, the world has ever witnessed. He perceives leadership as follows:

“It is very difficult task to take on the role of leadership. One must be a servant and accommodate thousand minds. There must not be shade of jealousy or selfishness. Then you are a leader” (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda, p-85*). The leadership model as adumbrated as well as demonstrated by Swami Vivekananda can be outlined in the following propositions.

PROPOSITION-1

*It is not of leader being servant; instead
It is servant being leader.*

The servant leader should have '*Servant First*' attitude, rather than leader first attitude. A servant becoming a leader is what is wanted than the leader becoming a servant. It implies that the leader should emerge from the under-privileged rather from privileged elite class.

Robert Greenleaf says:

“The signs of times suggest that, to future historians, the next thirty years will be marked as the period when the dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world effectively asserted the claims to stature, and that they are not led by a privileged elite-----
-----but by the exceptional people from their own kind ”
(*Robert Greenleaf Ibid, p.19*) .

One century earlier Swami Vivekananda foresaw the change that was to follow:

“A time will come when there will be the rising of the sudra class, with their sudrahood -----and gain absolute supremacy in every society.

You take it from me, this rising sudras will take place in Russia and then in China. India will rise next” (*Swami Vivekananda, My India, The India Eternal p -.48*)

PROPOSITION-2

It is not Compassion (daya) alone; but what is needed is intense love

In every sphere of activity a leader has to work with people where in he needs to be empathetic. Mere compassion, empathy and pity are not enough. One has to develop genuine love, and find oneness with the suffering people. He has to love them unconditionally and without expecting any reciprocal reward. Swamiji said: “The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant and afflicted –let these be your god. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda p-94*)

It is this unconditional love that makes a leader. “Many feel but only a few have the power of expressing one’s love, appreciation and sympathy for others, that enables one person to succeed better in spreading the idea than others” (*Ibid ,p-366*)

The love for humanity emanates from the spiritual oneness Swamiji sees in all living beings:

He who is in you and is outside of you, who works through every hand, walks through every foot, whose body you are- him worship and break all the idols” (*Ibid, p-350*)

PROPOSITION-3

Not only strong will but Holistic Personality

A servant leader should have great willpower and courage of conviction. All great achievements of men and women are the manifestations of their will. “The men of mighty will the world has produced have all been tremendous workers –gigantic souls with will powerful enough to overrun worlds, will they got by persistent work” (*Swami Vivekananda, Karmayoga, p-6*).

Swamiji further declares:

“What I want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel, inside which dwells a mind of the same material as that of which the thunderbolt is made” (*Letter of Swami Vivekananda, p-324*).

A servant leader should possess unblemished character: “Neither money pays, nor name, nor fame, nor learning, it is the character that can cleave through adamant wall of difficulties” (*Ibid p-69*).

Personal purity alone is not sufficient. It is the holistic personality that makes the

transformational leaders. “Great enterprise, boundless courage, tremendous energy and above all perfect obedience – these are the only traits that lead to individual and national regeneration (*Ibid p-267*).

PROPOSITION-4

Not only unselfishness; but non attachment to the rewards

Selfless service is the first prerequisite for the servant leader. According to Swamiji 'Unselfishness is god and selfishness is sin'. While doing the duty one should not think of anything else. “To work we have the right and not to the fruits thereof .There is no distinction between ends and means when you work without attachment. You should work like a master not as a slave work” (*Swami Vivekananda, Karma yoga, p-47*)

Unselfish and unattached work brings peace and happiness and frees oneself from the miseries of the world. According to Swamiji “Unselfishness is more paying, people have not the patience to practice it”. (*Ibid p-10*)

He again states: “He who gives up the little self for the world find the whole universe his” (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda, p-223*)

PROPOSITION-5

Not only service, but willingness to sacrifice.

Renunciation and service are the two fundamental ideas of Swami Vivekananda`s teaching. Swamiji`s concept of god is centered around service:

God is present in every jiva; there is no other god besides that. Who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak and in the diseased really worships Shiva.He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of caste, or creed or race or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees him only in temples. (*Swami Vivekananda, My India- The India Eternal, p-103*).

Serving people entails sacrifice or self-abnegation. “The earth`s bravest and best will have to sacrifice for the good of many, for the welfare of all.”(*Letters of Swami Vivekananda, p.295*).Swamiji emphasized the need for renunciation by the large number of young men and women in the task of nation building. “Then only will India awake, when hundreds of large hearted men and women giving up desires of enjoying the luxuries of life and will long exert themselves to their utmost for the well-being of the millions of their country men who are gradually sinking lower in the vortex of destitution and ignorance ”(*Ibid p-325*)

PROPOSITION-6

Being truthful and at the same time impersonal

Truthfulness, honesty and integrity are the qualities that a leader should always possess. These values are central to the individual and collective welfare. The integrity gives great strength for the leaders and helps to create an environment of ethics and harmony.

While being truthful to oneself and to the mission, a leader should be impersonal, without any personal aspiration and should be objective and even-minded.

Swamiji said:

“ It is absolutely necessary to the work that I should have the enthusiastic love of as many as possible, while I myself remain entirely impersonal”(*Ibid , p-366*).

PROPOSITION-7

It is neither lowering the stature of the leader nor being extremely unselfish

Servant leadership in the western conception imply lowering of stature or ‘a feeling of voluntary debasement or humility’

(Romain Rolland, the Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel p-227)

But according to Swamiji “To serve, to love is to be the equal of one who is serving and one who is served”. A leader has to hold his head high and should never compromise his self-esteem.

Swamiji cautions that: A leader should not become extremely unselfish as a result the followers become selfish and dependent on the leader. A leader by his extreme unselfishness only injures others by submission to every evil. “We have no right to make others selfish by our unselfishness” (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda, p.384*).A true leader should see that the followers are empowered and enabled to reach self-actualization stage.

PROPOSITION-8

It is not only self-conviction but ability to inspire others.

Swami Vivekananda said, ` Great convictions are the mother of great deeds ` .Behind

every great work there is a tremendous power of conviction. The world is shaped and moved by men and women of conviction'. (Swami Ranganathananda, *Harvard University Lecture*, p-15).

The faith in oneself generates a positive attitude. The conviction and positive attitude should be transferred to others; only then it will have impact on others. Injecting inspiration to others and removing all skepticism and cynicism is the foremost duty of a servant leader.

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