

# Swami Vivekananda: Struggle, Resilience, and Legacy

By **Acharya Prashant** - January 12, 2025



In honor of Swami Vivekananda's birthday, celebrated as Youth Day, seminars, meetings, and resolutions around youth empowerment take centerstage. The discussions surround Swami Ji's feat in taking Vedanta to the world, yet the immense struggles and challenges he faced often go unacknowledged. His journey – marked by opposition, ridicule, financial hardships and poor health – reveals the challenges of a genuine, truth-loving individual and a social reformer. Despite being a spiritual giant, his progressive Vedantic teachings faced tremendous resistance, specifically from the society he aimed to uplift. His story reminds us of the human side behind his extraordinary mission.

It is common practice to elevate and idolize great individuals—be it Ram, Krishna, sages, or saints—by weaving magical stories and attributing mystical powers to them. Our motto has been to place great individuals on a high pedestal, and this allows us to dismiss their achievements as purely divine, sparing us the challenge of recognizing our own human potential for greatness. This mindset prevents us from truly learning from their lives and avoids the responsibility of driving meaningful change. Idolizing them as superhuman shields us from the challenge of rising up to their standards of perseverance, courage, and dedication.

This tendency of ours extends to Swami Vivekananda as well. Popular narratives about him often focus on the divine and extraordinary aspects of his personality, overshadowing the very real struggles and challenges he faced as a human being. Swami Vivekananda's journey was fraught with immense challenges, as detailed in his letters to friends, students, and well-wishers.

Despite the popular notion that his visit to Chicago in 1893 was universally celebrated, he faced significant opposition, especially from orthodox Indian and American religious groups who criticized his attire, language, and eating habits. In a letter to Haridas Viharidas Desai in 1894, Swami Ji sharing his frustration with the destructive behavior of slanderers wrote, "The whole world is full of mischief-makers and faultfinders. Every successful man must have their hands at his heels. These parasites, in the shape of critics, will eat up all that you can do, and in return, will leave you their load of dirt to carry."

Swami Ji's work required funds, but financial support was hard to come by. He appealed to common people, rejecting wealth from those who could not comprehend his vision. Despite lecturing extensively in America, resistance from Christian missionary groups and Hindu institutions hindered his efforts. Established Hindu organizations, seeing him as a threat to tradition, actively worked to obstruct him, both in India and abroad. Swami Ji lamented that even his countrymen in America spread false propaganda against him. Despite working tirelessly, he faced apathy and rejection, which started affecting his health. Swami Ji's 1897 letter to Sister Nivedita wrote, "I am caught here in a web of misery... my health is breaking down, and I do not know how long I can hold out... I feel my body breaking under the strain of work and worry."

By 1900, his health had worsened due to relentless efforts to raise funds. In a letter to Miss Josephine MacLeod, he candidly admitted, "There is no money, endless hard work, and still no outcomes." Crowds would gather to hear him speak for free but disappeared when asked for contributions. This lack of support deeply saddened him and ultimately cost him his life.

When informed by Alasinga Perumal in 1895, that Indian newspapers were maligning him, Swami Ji wrote "India must have a good deal of abuse hurled against me. If you hear some of the filthy stories the orthodox men and women invent against me, you will be astonished. Now, do you mean to say that a Sannyasin should go about defending himself against the brutal and cowardly attacks of these self-seeking men and women?... Here am I struggling day and night in the midst of stranger...What help does India send?" denoting it a culture of 'chidra-anveshan' (fault-finding). He attributed such behavior to jealousy, noting it as a primary defect of enslaved societies.

To weaken Swami Ji's resolve for his mission, he received assaults not only on his work but also on a personal level. He was swindled out of his personal money, generously given by a patron, to buy a house for his ailing, elderly mother. Expressing his disgust on 6 August 1899, he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Ole Bull, "The aunt whom you saw had a deep-laid plan to cheat me, and she and her people contrived to sell me a house for 6,000 rupees or 400 pounds, and I bought [it] for my mother in good faith. Then they would not give me possession, hoping that I would not go to court for the shame of taking forcible possession as a Sannyasin. I do not think I have spent even one rupee from what you and others gave me for the work. Cap. Sevier gave me 8,000 Rs. with the express desire of helping my mother. This money, it seems, has also gone to the dogs"

During his time, we let Vivekananda down by subjecting him to intense opposition, causing him to endure severe financial struggles and relentless criticism. If we believe that we have learned a lesson from the wrongs we committed against Swami Ji and would today show kindness to someone like him, we are sadly mistaken. What was Swami Ji challenging back then? The youth of that time believed that life was all about weakness and misery and defeat and subjugation. He wasn't really challenging weakness per se; he was challenging conditioning. It's just that in those times, conditioning expressed itself as a weakness.

If Vivekananda were here today, he would address the deeper conditioning of our time—the beliefs and confidence we hold. Swami Ji's work would be equally difficult today since beliefs have changed; the believer has not. The one who loves to live in beliefs has not changed; it's just that he has changed his beliefs. He would tell today's youth to challenge this relentless consumption. He would say that believing in something without thorough inquiry is mere superstition. True inquiry doesn't stop at the belief itself but probes the believer—asking why they hold onto certain assumptions. Without this self-inquiry, any belief becomes superstition.

Today's dominant superstition and primary conditioning revolve around consumption. We equate happiness with acquiring more possessions, experiences, and resources. This mindset has led us to consume not just things but even our bodies, others' bodies, and the earth's resources, all under the guise of personal choice or life's purpose.

To eradicate superstition, we need to think of what we consider normal, obvious, and commonsensical. It is that which we take as common sense that is defeating us; that is a nemesis. That which we think of as obvious and certain and feel very assured of — so assured of that you don't even want to question it — that's what is defeating us.

Swami Vivekananda would have stressed the importance of enriching our education system to focus on inner development and teach us to inquire about the believer, one who wants to consume. Without understanding the reasons behind our thoughts, desires, or actions, even our most passionate pursuits result in harm rather than fulfillment.

On this Youth Day, let us honor his legacy by accepting the power of education, inquiry, and the lessons drawn from life's struggles. Let us recognize the humaneness of such a remarkable individual, acknowledging his perseverance and unwavering love for the truth instead of attributing his greatness to divinity or mystical origins. Only then can we truly learn from his example and challenge the limitations and fears within ourselves to break through boundaries.

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