CHAPTER 41

Hail Hindu Heroes!

Celebrating Some of India’s Champions of Virtue, Strength and Spirituality

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 (1823–1883): “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 encyclopedia-work on Hinduism called Satya Prakasha, 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 1823 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, Virajmanad 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-realisation, 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 21, 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 Dakshineswar. 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.

Brahmendranath Tagore (1861–1894): Poet, novelist, critic, philosopher, nationalist and educationalist. Tagore is the greatest of modern Bengali writers and a treasurer 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 Sanskrit tradition. Tagore wrote more than 1,000 poems and 1,000 songs, besides novels, short stories, plays and essays. He was a musician of the highest order and a painter of dedicated sensitivity. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his collection of poems entitled Gitanjali.

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 development of his nation and humanity. Born on January 12, 1863 in Calcutta, of Shri Vishwanatha Dutta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi, Narendranath Dutta, as Swamiji was called in 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 samanya-sim before departing for America. Vivekananda became famous after he became the President of Religions on September 12, 1893, in Chicago, USA. The brilliant light that was Swamiji went out on July 4, 1902, when he had just turned 40. He was the one of the greatest modern interpreters and promoters of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

Mahatma 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. Innocence and tyranny should be fought with truth and non-violence 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.
Sadhu T. Vaswani (1879–1966): An eminent educationist, great social reformer, philosopher and a man of God, Thanaevardas 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 an education 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, and after his elementary education at Tiruchuli, he was sent to Tiruttani, Tirupati, Vellore and Chennai. He had his education at Tiruttani, Tirupati, Vellore and Chennai. He was a great orator, one of the earliest supporters of Gandhi’s noncooperation movement. Returning to Hyderabad, in 1907, he started an organization called Sadhu Sat-Sang devoted to women’s causes. He presided over a number of conferences and meetings connected with humanitarianism, religion and peace during the first three decades of the century. Following partition, Vaswani settled in Pune in 1949–52, and after his departure from this world in 1966, for revolutionary activity and acquitted after one year. He lived a life of spiritual commitment and selfless service to humanity.

Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950): Born in an orthodox brahmin family, she later became a member of the Rajya Sabha. She was an artist and a saint, 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 Kolaba district on September 29, 1896. 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 bhoomis (gift of land), sampattidan (gift of wealth), jeevadan (gift of life) and other movements are logical extensions of Gandhian 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 bhoomidan movement, was a demonstration of the Gandhian doctrine of trusteeship.

Of the many teachings of the Gita which Vaswani highlighted in his talks, one of the most important was the role of self-help. “The Gita is prepositional to go to the lesser and weakest and the least tured 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 (1904–1988): She is the resurrector of the Indian dance, the 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 trucking was a significant challenge. Bharata natyam was then learned and performed in the temples by Deodatis (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 presidency of India in 1977.