

Vedic Wisdom festival

24-25 Nov 2018, Mumbai

Twelve spiritual masters over two full days at Ramakrishna mission riveted an audience of 230 people with wisdom, experiences and many A-ha moments in a unique Vedic wisdom festival organised by the Arsha Vidya Foundation, Mumbai. What was unique about the festival was that it had something for everyone and had both monks as well as householder Vedanta teachers who were disciples of Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam.

Swami Devakantananda (Ramakrishna Mission) through Swami Vivekananda's life journey highlighted the intensity of instructions and teachings received by Swami Vivekananda and his subsequent travels across India reminding people of the greatness of the civilization and 'Dharma running through their veins.'



Swamini BrahmaPrananda, the founder of the festival and a Vedanta teacher illuminated the indispensable role of the Vedas in shaping a thriving ancient civilization and hence 'how Vedic wisdom was indeed Veda-mata, the mother of all including the mother of all celebrations!' With many examples she shared how many current cultural practices trace its roots to the wisdom shared thousands of years ago. We were achievements in and of ourselves as we belonged to such a rich heritage that shared the the vision of oneness and the interconnectedness of all forms. Through the two days, Pujya Swami Dayananda ji was very much venerated and celebrated his words and wisdom were shared with all through video clips, prasada book given and his pictures at the venue.

Swami Brahmaavidananda, the founder of the festival and Aarsha Vidya Foundation highlighted that the concept of a festival or mela was not new to us. From the time of Veda Vyaasa who had the unique distinction of bringing together Rishis, teachers, scholars for a confluence of knowledge, this tradition of bringing together wisdom teachers continues to this day. 'Ananda', fullness had to be discovered as one's own unchanging nature. This was possible in every generation and he quipped that even the great grammarian Panini in his writings traced to more than 3000 years ago, referred to 'modern times' then. The need for security, pleasures, relationships being universal, a lasting solution is provided by the Vedas in discovering oneself as free from any limitation. With his inimitable wit, through an elaborate example he showed how in a seemingly hopeless situation the capacity to experience joy or even laugh was an indication that happiness did not independently lie in an external situation but it only manifested. He emphasised the need to approach a teacher to learn this as the very Veda that shares the truth also shares the method to know.

Neema Majmudar, an ex UN economist and Vedanta teacher drawing from apt contemporary examples such as the ecosystem, neuroplasticity of the brain, the cells of the human body, the web of the spider was able to unequivocally establish the understanding of interconnectedness. Reflecting the wisdom of the two birds perched on a tree branch with one watching as the other experienced the fruits, she gave examples of how people experienced the world by either being a rat racer or a hedonistic person (who eventually becomes a complainer) or a nihilistic person looking at everything negatively. With the vision of interconnectedness, a person could easily move from isolation to connectedness, from separateness to belonging, from dissatisfaction to gratitude and from being just a consumer to a contributor.

In the panel discussion on 'Today's children. Tomorrow's leaders', children and representatives from Bal Vihar, Chinmaya mission (Pramodini Rao) and Art of living (Twinkle Bachkaniwala) spoke about how values, activities and stories had helped to have better focus, discipline and self acceptance. One of them also demonstrated reading despite being blindfolded pointing to the tremendous potential we all possess. When asked about the advice children could give the parents, the children – Megha, Yugendhara and Jeet shyly said that parents should not compare their children and should lead by example rather than preaching. Practical and sound advice indeed from children!

Known as an auxiliary discipline of the Vedas, Astrology is a topic that is shrouded in mystery and misconception. To demystify this ancient discipline of knowledge, Herga Ravindra Bhat educated the audience about Astrology being a study of one's karmic patterns. Having two parts – *ganitam* and *phalam*, *ganitam* depended on calculations of the relative position of the sun and planets, similar to astronomy. *Phalam* was pure astrology based on the position of the planets at one's birth time and other coordinates, which illumined the patterns of situations in one's lifetime. He highlighted the role of karma, the relationship of different remedies to alleviate one's suffering through different pujas and mantras and most importantly living a value based life which could be enhanced by astrology rather than the other way around. One could live intelligently by being forewarned and forearmed through Astrology.

Prof.K.Ramasubramanian (IIT, Mumbai and a scholar in Maths, Vedanta & Sanskrit) dazzled the audience with his scholarship. He said that we tend to take scientific facts as absolute but a lot of scientific theories are based on assumptions which seem sound, which in Vedanta is called *anyatha – aapattih*. He also spoke about how the knowledge of the world, gained through perception enhanced by instrumentation and technology and inference, presumption and other forms of logic, continued to be limited. Science has progressed on certain assumptions which cannot be considered as the holy truth but subject to correction later. In the context of black holes, the closer you get to the core, the more difficult it becomes to explain, which is similar to the description of natural phenomenon as *anirvachaniyam* –(categorically inexplicable) in Vedanta. He explained the Vedantic phrase referring to the nature of Atma– anoraniyaan mahato mahiyaan (smaller than the smallest, bigger than the biggest) in mathematical terms saying that it is smaller than zero and as big as infinity.



After an absorbing music recital by Sraboni Chaudhuri, the audience was suitably charged on day 2 to fully assimilate the role of bhakti in Vedanta by Swami Shuddhabodhananda. He presented the *sadhya*, the goal to be achieved in discovering oneself and how karma and bhakti played a part. While there were various manifestations of love expressed between friends, parents and children, couples, absolute love could only be possible and reserved for the Lord. He stressed the need for *nama japa* and exhorted the audience to take to simple acts of bhakti, to evoke bhakti for God in oneself. He also quoted Purandhara Dasa by saying, ‘ Whether you (referring to God) are there or not, it does not matter, if I chant your name I get the grace.’

Through the story of a little wave in the Indian ocean Swamini Brahma prajnananda spoke about three stages of understanding Vedanta and its effect in one’s emotional life, the first stage being – My mind is a problem, giving way to the second stage – My mind is an inner instrument (*antah karana*) and I learn to use it well for my pursuits which gives way to the third stage – I am free from the mind and its many conditions and that was true knowledge. She elaborated on the following areas of one’s emotional life stressing the emotional order as Ishvara and exhorted the participants to work on the following five areas : Emotional expression, Emotional security, Emotional health, Emotional strength and Emotional independence emphasizing that emotions were a gift from *Ishvara*.

Lakshya a Yoga teacher from Holland who has now found home in India took the participants on a relaxing journey of awareness and attention through a couple of simple yoga asanas, which people could do anywhere.

Uday Acharya, a Vedanta teacher had a unique topic – The problem is you. The solution is you. Tapping into the universal conclusion, 'I am not ok' he spoke about the need to have a life position of 'I am ok, You are ok' as everyone justifiably deserves success and happiness. All of us face situational problems in life and underlying that is a fundamental issue – I am not good enough. Modern psychology cannot solve this problem as it is an existential problem much like the problem of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. While most other problems can be resolved by us as problem solvers we cannot solve this existential problem. A higher standpoint, a *pramana*, a means of knowledge called Vedanta is required which would reveal to me what I really am – unconditioned by all the conditions I find myself in.

Falguni Harkisandas spoke from the heart about her journey from a carefree teenager to becoming a Yoga teacher and still searching until she found her home in Vedanta. Despite doing so much for the family she spoke about how housewives generally undervalued themselves and how she was helping them in sharing the knowledge she had gained.

The festival drew to a close with an exciting engrossing session on 'Myths around Hinduism' where the panelists were Dr Uma Shankar M, Principal of SIES College and Swami Brahmavidananda. The participants had been encouraged to put their questions in a box not quite expecting the huge overwhelming response. The main question that bogged everyone was the Supreme court decision on the right of entry of women into Sabarimala. While the panelists agreed that the Supreme Court is the final authority in interpreting the law and guided by the constitution, if people felt that justice had not been delivered, there is a constitutional guarantee expressed in the Right to the right of rights. That means that people had the right to agitate peacefully until a problem is addressed. There can be no discrimination on the basis of gender or caste or creed. At the same time Article 356 speaks of the protection of unique cultural practices and traditions. If any unique practice and tradition harms a particular community, social group or gender, it could be over ruled like the



practice of sati, triple talaq at one go. In this way, drawing from history, energy work, agama shastra and the Indian constitution, Swami Brahmavidananda strongly advocated doing an *ashtamangala prashnam* (an astrological process) to ascertain the wish of the deity at Sabarimala as the temple was the abode of the deity. The *prathishtha* of the temple is such that it elevates the spirits and energy of the person and a woman dissuaded from entry has nothing to do with discrimination but more with her own protection as her energies are disturbed as her 'apana vayu'(downward and expelling energy system) is operating more during menstruation. Dr Uma Shankar, was in concurrence with following age old traditions of the temple.



Another question was 'Are Hindus feeling marginalised in India? Dr Uma said that an average Hindu did not feel marginalised in India but those who ran institutions do feel so sometimes due to the many reservations under the various quotas. Swami Brahmavidananda highlighted that Hindu institutions unfairly get only 50% exemption under 80G unlike minority institutions, where it was 100%. Through the Devasom Board, only Hindu temples are controlled over and above the income tax and charity commission rules. No other places of worships such as church, mosque are controlled like this. In the Hindus that run organizations there is a sense of unfairness. The fog surrounding many other myths around Hinduism was cleared and a promise to post answers to the remaining questions www.vedicwisdomfestival.in. All the speakers conduct classes and programs, details of which can be obtained on the festival website. The organizers were very encouraged with the positive feedback received from the participants and have promised to make the festival an annual program. The festival was supported by Canara Bank (Hospitality Partner) and The Hindu (Media Partner).