



Special Issue

Swami Vivekananda



Swami Vivekananda, known in his pre-monastic life as Narendra Nath Datta, was born in an affluent family in Kolkata on 12 January 1863. His father, Vishwanath Datta, was a successful attorney with interests in a wide range of subjects, and his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was endowed with deep devotion, strong character and other qualities. A precocious boy, Narendra excelled in music, gymnastics and studies. By the time he graduated from Calcutta University, he had acquired a vast knowledge of different subjects, especially Western philosophy and history. Born with a yogic temperament, he used to practise meditation even from his boyhood, and was associated with Brahma Movement for some time.

With Sri Ramakrishna

At the threshold of youth Narendra had to pass through a period of spiritual crisis when he was assailed by doubts about the existence of God. It was at that time he first heard about Sri Ramakrishna from one of his English professors at college. One day in November 1881, Narendra went to meet Sri Ramakrishna who was staying at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar. He straightaway asked the Master a question which he had put to several others but had received no satisfactory answer: "Sir, have you seen God?" Without a moment's hesitation, Sri Ramakrishna replied: "Yes, I have. I see Him as clearly as I see you, only in a much intenser sense."

Apart from removing doubts from the mind of Narendra, Sri Ramakrishna won him over through his pure, unselfish love. Thus began a guru-disciple relationship which is quite unique in the history of spiritual masters. Narendra now became a frequent visitor to Dakshineswar and, under the guidance of the Master, made rapid strides on the spiritual path. At Dakshineswar, Narendra also met several young men who were devoted to Sri Ramakrishna, and they all became close friends.

Difficult Situations

After a few years two events took place which caused Narendra considerable distress. One was the sudden death of his father in 1884. This left the family penniless, and Narendra had to bear the burden of supporting his mother, brothers and sisters. The second event was the illness of Sri Ramakrishna which was diagnosed to be cancer of the throat. In September 1885 Sri Ramakrishna was moved to a house at Shyampukur, and a few months later to a rented villa at Cossipore. In these two places the young disciples nursed the Master with devoted care. In spite of poverty at home and inability to find a job for himself, Narendra joined the group as its leader. After the Master's passing, fifteen of his young disciples (one more joined them later) began to live together in a dilapidated building at Baranagar in North Kolkata. Under the leadership of Narendra, they formed a new monastic brotherhood, and in 1887 they took the formal vows of sannyasa, thereby assuming new names. Narendra now became Swami Vivekananda (although this name was actually assumed much later.)

Awareness of Life's Mission

After establishing the new monastic order, Vivekananda heard the inner call for a greater mission in his life. While most of the followers of Sri Ramakrishna thought of him in relation to their own personal lives, Vivekananda thought of the Master in relation to India and the rest of the world. As the prophet of the present age, what was Sri Ramakrishna's message to the modern world and to India in particular? This question and the awareness of his own inherent powers urged Swamiji to go out alone into the wide world. So in the middle of 1890, after receiving the blessings of Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, known to the world as Holy Mother, who was then staying in Kolkata, Swamiji left Baranagar Math and embarked on a long journey of exploration and discovery of India.

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Discovery of Real India



During his travels all over India, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses. He was the first religious leader in India to understand and openly declare that the real cause of India's downfall was the neglect of the masses. The immediate need was to provide food and other bare necessities of life to the hungry millions. For this they should be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc. It was in this context that Vivekananda grasped the crux of the problem of poverty in India (which had escaped the attention of social reformers of his days): owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lot.

It was first of all necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. For this they needed a life-giving, inspiring message. Swamiji found this message in the principle of the Atman, the doctrine of the potential divinity of the soul, taught in Vedanta, the ancient system of religious philosophy of India. He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion, but they had never been taught the life-giving, ennobling principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life.

Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: secular knowledge to improve their economic condition, and spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their moral sense. The next question was, how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses? Through education - this was the answer that Swamiji found.

Need for an Organization

One thing became clear to Swamiji: to carry out his plans for the spread of education and for the uplift of the poor masses, and also of women, an efficient organization of dedicated people was needed. As he said later on, he wanted "to set in motion a machinery which will bring noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." It was to serve as this 'machinery' that Swamiji founded the Ramakrishna Mission a few years later.

Decision to attend the Parliament of Religions

It was when these ideas were taking shape in his mind in the course of his wanderings that Swami Vivekananda heard about the World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers in India wanted him to attend the Parliament. He too felt that the Parliament would provide the right forum to present his Master's message to the world, and so he decided to go to America. Another reason which prompted Swamiji to go to America was to seek financial help for his project of uplifting the masses. Swamiji, however, wanted to have an inner certitude and divine call regarding his mission. Both of these he got while he sat in deep meditation on the rock-island at Kanyakumari. With the funds partly collected by his Chennai disciples and partly provided by the Raja of Khetri, Swami Vivekananda left for America from Mumbai on 31 May 1893.



The Parliament of Religions and After His speeches at the World's Parliament of Religions held in September 1893 made him famous as an 'orator by divine right' and as a 'Messenger of Indian wisdom to the Western world'. After the Parliament, Swamiji spent nearly three and a half years spreading Vedanta as lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna, mostly in the eastern parts of USA and also in London.

Awakening His Countrymen

He returned to India in January 1897. In response to the enthusiastic welcome that he received everywhere, he delivered a series of lectures in different parts of India, which created a great stir all over the country. Through these inspiring and profoundly significant lectures Swamiji attempted to do the following:

to rouse the religious consciousness of the people and create in them pride in their cultural heritage;
to bring about unification of Hinduism by pointing out the common bases of its sects;
to focus the attention of educated people on the plight of the downtrodden masses, and to expound his plan for their uplift by the application of the principles of Practical Vedanta

Founding of Ramakrishna Mission Soon after his return to Kolkata, Swami Vivekananda accomplished another important task of his mission on earth. He founded on 1 May 1897 a unique type of organization known as Ramakrishna Mission, in which monks and lay people would jointly undertake propagation of Practical Vedanta, and various forms of social service, such as running hospitals, schools, colleges, hostels, rural development centres etc, and conducting massive relief and rehabilitation work for victims of earthquakes, cyclones and other calamities, in different parts of India and other countries.

Belur Math

In early 1898 Swami Vivekananda acquired a big plot of land on the western bank of the Ganga at a place called Belur to have a permanent abode for the monastery and monastic Order originally started at Baranagar, and got it registered as Ramakrishna Math after a couple of years. Here Swamiji established a new, universal pattern of monastic life which adapts ancient monastic ideals to the conditions of modern life, which gives equal importance to personal illumination and social service, and which is open to all men without any distinction of religion, race or caste.

Disciples

It may be mentioned here that in the West many people were influenced by Swami Vivekananda's life and message. Some of them became his disciples or devoted friends. Among them the names of Margaret Noble (later known as Sister Nivedita), Captain and Mrs Sevier, Josephine McLeod and Sara Ole Bull, deserve special mention. Nivedita dedicated her life to educating girls in Kolkata. Swamiji had many Indian disciples also, some of whom joined Ramakrishna Math and became sannyasins.

Last Days

In June 1899 he went to the West on a second visit. This time he spent most of his time in the West coast of USA. After delivering many lectures there, he returned to Belur Math in December 1900. The rest of his life was spent in India, inspiring and guiding people, both monastic and lay. Incessant work, especially giving lectures and inspiring people, told upon Swamiji's health. His health deteriorated and the end came quietly on the night of 4 July 1902. Before his Mahasamadhi he had written to a Western follower: "It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body, to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God."



Swami Vivekananda rock memorial at Kanyakumari

Vivekananda's contributions to World Culture

Making an objective assessment of Swami Vivekananda's contributions to world culture, the eminent British historian A L Basham stated that "in centuries to come, he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world..." Some of the main contributions that Swamiji made to the modern world are mentioned below:

1. **New Understanding of Religion:** One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world is his interpretation of religion as a universal experience of transcendent Reality, common to all humanity. Swamiji met the challenge of modern science by showing that religion is as scientific as science itself; religion is the 'science of consciousness'. As such, religion and science are not contradictory to each other but are complementary. This universal conception frees religion from the hold of superstitions, dogmatism, priestcraft and intolerance, and makes religion the highest and noblest pursuit - the pursuit of supreme Freedom, supreme Knowledge, supreme Happiness.
2. **New View of Man:** Vivekananda's concept of 'potential divinity of the soul' gives a new, ennobling concept of man. The present age is the age of humanism which holds that man should be the chief concern and centre of all activities and thinking. Through science and technology man has attained great prosperity and power, and modern methods of communication and travel have converted human society into a 'global village'. But the degradation of man has also been going on apace, as witnessed by the enormous increase in broken homes, immorality, violence, crime, etc. in modern society. Vivekananda's concept of potential divinity of the soul prevents this degradation, divinizes human relationships, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Swamiji has laid the foundation for 'spiritual humanism', which is manifesting itself through several neo-humanistic movements and the current interest in meditation, Zen etc all over the world.
3. **New Principle of Morality and Ethics:** The prevalent morality, in both individual life and social life, is mostly based on fear - fear of the police, fear of public ridicule, fear of God's punishment, fear of Karma, and so on. The current theories of ethics also do not explain why a person should be moral and be good to others. Vivekananda has given a new theory of ethics and new principle of morality based on the intrinsic purity and oneness of the Atman. We should be pure because purity is our real nature, our true divine Self or Atman. Similarly, we should love and serve our neighbours because we are all one in the Supreme Spirit known as Paramatman or Brahman.
4. **Bridge between the East and the West:** Another great contribution of Swami Vivekananda was to build a bridge between Indian culture and Western culture. He did it by interpreting Hindu scriptures and philosophy and the Hindu way of life and institutions to the Western people in an idiom which they could understand. He made the Western people realize that they had to learn much from Indian spirituality for their own well-being. He showed that, in spite of her poverty and backwardness, India had a great contribution to make to world culture. In this way he was instrumental in ending India's cultural isolation from the rest of the world. He was India's first great cultural ambassador to the West.

On the other hand, Swamiji's interpretation of ancient Hindu scriptures, philosophy, institutions, etc prepared the mind of Indians to accept and apply in practical life two best elements of Western culture, namely science and technology and humanism. Swamiji has taught Indians how to master Western science and technology and at the same time develop spiritually. Swamiji has also taught Indians how to adapt Western humanism (especially the ideas of individual freedom, social equality and justice and respect for women) to Indian ethos.

Swamiji's Contributions to India

In spite of her innumerable linguistic, ethnic, historical and regional diversities, India has had from time immemorial a strong sense of cultural unity. It was, however, Swami Vivekananda who revealed the true foundations of this culture and thus clearly defined and strengthened the sense of unity as a nation. Swamiji gave Indians proper understanding of their country's great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past.

Furthermore, he pointed out to Indians the drawbacks of Western culture and the need for India's contribution to overcome these drawbacks. In this way Swamiji made India a nation with a global mission.

Sense of unity, pride in the past, sense of mission - these were the factors which gave real strength and purpose to India's nationalist movement. Several eminent leaders of India's freedom movement have acknowledged their indebtedness to Swamiji.

Free India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Rooted in the past, full of pride in India's prestige, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life's problems, and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present ... he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past." Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose wrote:

"Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect, self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings."

Swamiji's most unique contribution to the creation of new India was to open the minds of Indians to their duty to the downtrodden masses. Long before the ideas of Karl Marx were known in India, Swamiji spoke about the role of the labouring classes in the production of the country's wealth. **Swamiji was the first religious leader in India to speak for the masses, formulate a definite philosophy of service, and organize large-scale social service.**

In 1984, the Government of India declared and decided to observe the Birthday of Swami Vivekananda (12 January, according to English calendar) as National Youth Day every year from 1985 onwards. To quote from the Government of India's Communication, 'it was felt that the philosophy of Swamiji and the ideals for which he lived and worked could be a great source of inspiration for the Indian Youth.'

The responsibility of this nation's future rests on the youth. So **"Awake Arise and stop not till the goal is reached."**



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