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## LIFE AND MESSAGE OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

**Neha Anand\***

\*Assistant Professor,  
Department of Humanities,  
TeerthankerMahaveer Institute of Management and Technology,  
Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA  
Email id: nehaanand002@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

*A royal, magnificent person of commanding presence, great intellect and profound insight, Swami Vivekananda was only 30 years old when he made a sensation at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Three and a half years later, when he returned to India, his birthplace, it was as a giant of strength, bravery, confidence, love and manliness the personification of the ideal of the 'man-making and character-building' school he preached. Swami Vivekananda was born NarendranathDatta on 12 January 1863 in Calcutta in a respectable middle-class family. During his early years he had remarkable mental talents which some people either misinterpreted or disregarded, but which others recognized and took as indications of an excellent person. Narendra's ability focus on concentrating his attention on one thing while disconnecting it from everything else was extraordinary. Sri Ramakrishna carefully mentored Narendra and a band of other young devoted followers, and the Master selected Narendra as the head of the group. Swami Vivekananda recommended 'man-making and character-building education.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Education, India, Spiritual, Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta on 12 January 1863 in Calcutta in a respectable middle-class family. His father, ViswanathDatta, was an attorney and was a devotee of the arts and literature. Although liberal-minded, Viswanath was dubious of religious rituals. On the other hand, Narendra's mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was a devout, kind-hearted woman, dedicated to the Hindu traditions. The impact of each of his parents on Narendra was distinct, but collectively they created a favorable environment for the precocious child to develop into an active young man with lofty aspirations.

During his early years he had remarkable mental talents which some people either misinterpreted or disregarded, but which others recognized and took as indications of an excellent person. As a kid he loved to play at meditation and would quickly get absorbed. Once while he was sitting so in meditation together with several of his companions, the unexpected apparition of a snake crawling across the floor frightened all of the youngsters out of the room save Narendra, who remained immersed in meditation.

Narendra's ability of focus – of concentrating his attention on one thing while disconnecting it from everything else was extraordinary. In his latter life he once shot in sequence twelve eggshells floating up and down on the water of a river, although he had never fired a pistol before. No less remarkable was his self-control. He stayed cool and unruffled, no matter how serious the scenario he was in.

Ever since boyhood, Narendra had had tremendous respect for traveling monks, and he liked to imagine that one day he too might become a monk. But his desire only became apparent during his undergraduate days at the Scottish Church College. He started to seek out academics and spiritual leaders in order to challenge them. But none of them could satisfy him. It was through William Hastie, principal of his college, which he heard for the first time of Sri Ramakrishna, the saint of Dakshineswar. His encounter with Sri Ramakrishna in November 1881 proved to be a turning moment in his life.

Sri Ramakrishna carefully mentored Narendra and a band of other young devoted followers, and the Master selected Narendra as the head of the group. After the Master's passing away, these young devotees got together in a decrepit home in Baranagore, a northern suburb of Calcutta, which became the initial center of the Ramakrishna Order. With a complete renunciation of worldly things and an unshakable devotion to their Master and his teachings, they suffered incredible privations and dedicated themselves to spiritual activities[1].

Travelling across the length and width of India, mainly on foot, Narendra was attempting to figure out a purpose for his life. While on the road, he regularly battled hunger and often found himself with nowhere to stay. To Narendra, this was a chance to understand India and its needs at first hand. He noticed that his nation had a rich spiritual legacy, but had failed to enjoy the benefit of it. The weak areas were poverty, caste, and neglect of the people, oppression of women and a poor system of education.

Narendranath Datta had by this time been converted into Swami Vivekananda, and he had discovered his life's purpose. Taking a broad look at the early part of his life we can see that there were four influences that formed his personality and philosophy:

- India was then under British control and was undergoing an upheaval in its cultural life. British control had brought India into the global community, and English education and modernity had given fresh hope. Yet, thinking on the real outcome of all this, Vivekananda remarked, 'A few hundred, modernised, half-educated, and denationalised men are all that there is to show of contemporary English India — nothing else'. In his youth, Narendra 'became intrigued with the Evolutionism of Herbert Spencer', and 'translated Spencer's work on "Education" into Bengali for Gurudas Chattopadhyaya, his publisher'. It is also claimed that Narendra exchanged communication with Herbert Spencer for some time. But, alongside his study of Spencer and other Western thinkers, he also dug deep into Indian Sanskrit texts.
- Sri Ramakrishna, the saint of Dakshineswar, had a significant effect on his contemporaries who were regarded the architects of modern India. He was virtually illiterate and spoke in a rural dialect, but the spiritual depth and force of his teachings astonished intellectual giants such as Friederich Max Müller. In Swami Vivekananda's opinion, his Master perfectly harmonized the intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual aspects of a human being and was the role model for the future.
- Swami Vivekananda's family also gave a solid moral and cultural basis to his existence. Due in large part to his background, his tastes were broad and his interests vast. In reality, the yearning he had gained in his childhood for information drove him afterwards to collect as much as he could wherever he went - whether in India or in the West.
- Equally essential, if not more so, was the Swami's understanding of India based on his first-hand experiences gained during his wanderings across the nation. His pilgrimages changed him. He became a genuine lover of mankind and became gifted with the characteristic of sarvabhutahiteratah (being dedicated to the welfare of all creatures).

At around the same time that Vivekananda finished his tour of India, he was invited to represent Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions, to be held that year (1893) in Chicago. Swami

Vivekananda also thought that this would offer him a chance to do something for his nation, therefore he decided to travel. When the Parliament of Religions met in September 1893, Swami Vivekananda made a sensation. While other delegates talked of their respective religions and creeds, Swami Vivekananda spoke of the God of all, the source and substance of all faith. His appeal for religious peace and acceptance of all faiths earned him tremendous recognition. When the Parliament was finished, he embarked on a lecture tour throughout the Midwest and the East coast of the United States. People flocked in huge numbers to hear him talk everywhere he went, especially intellectuals, thereby confirming his Master's prophesy that he would eventually become a 'world teacher'[2].

Vivekananda's visit to the United States also had a rejuvenating impact on India. Previously, people who had gone to the West from India were full of apologies for the condition of their nation. He was not. He constantly talked about his nation with enthusiasm and respect. Thus, his work in the West fostered self-respect and self-confidence in the Indian mentality and aided India in its quest for identity. It also helped to eliminate the preconceptions and deep-rooted biases about India in Westerners' minds.

After giving up his lecture tour, the Swami began offering free courses on Vedanta and Yoga in New York. This culminated in the establishment of the Vedanta Society there. In the summer of 1895 he sailed for England at the request of E.T. Sturdy and Henrietta Müller. His talks there were very successful. In December 1895 Vivekananda went to the United States, where he resumed his courses in New York and also spoke in other places, and then travelled to Europe again in April 1896. In May 1896, the Swami met Max Müller and his wife in Oxford. At the end of December 1896, Vivekananda sailed to India from Europe[3].

When the word came that Swami Vivekananda was returning to India, people all across the nation prepared to give him a hero's welcome. The Swami came in South India in January 1897 accompanied by three of his Western followers. Everywhere he went addresses of greeting were given and crowds flocked to meet him. In Swami Vivekananda's answer to these speeches, he revealed that he had a plan in mind to assist elevate the people. In fact, as early as 24 December 1894, he had written in a letter, 'My entire goal in life is to put in action a mechanism which would convey great ideals to the door of everyone, and then let men and women determine their own fate'[4].

On 1 May 1897, a few months after his return to Calcutta, the Swami put his plan in action when he established the Ramakrishna Mission. This was the beginning of an organized effort to assist the suffering people via educational, cultural, medical and humanitarian activities. Within a few weeks after the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission, one of Swami Vivekananda's brother disciples, Swami Akhandananda, was traveling through Murshidabad in Bengal and was shocked by the terrible situation of the people there who were suffering from a famine. He instantly began relief work. Since then the Ramakrishna Mission has continued to come to the assistance of people suffering from natural or man-made disasters.

## **2. CHARACTER EDUCATION AND UNIVERSAL VALUES**

Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, used to remark that manush has to become man-hush that is, a man needs to become a real man. 'He alone is a man,' he remarked, 'whose spiritual awareness has been awakened'. Following his Master,

Swami Vivekananda stressed that 'the goal of all education, all training, should be this man-making'.

Lamenting about the existing system of schooling, he said:

But, instead of that, we are constantly striving to clean up the exterior. What sense in polishing up

the exterior when there is no inside? The goal and purpose of all training is to help the guy develop.

In order to correct the flaws in the current system, man's restricted perspective of himself, on which the existing system of education is founded, has to be reassessed. A human person is not just a combination of body and intellect. He is something more. According to the Vedanta philosophy, a human being has five sheaths, or coverings: the physical sheath, the vital sheath, the mental sheath, the intellectual sheath, and the joyful sheath. Today's education can at best touch the first four sheaths, but not the final one. Secular information, skills and moral values may take care of the first four sheaths, but spiritual understanding is needed for the fifth. Moreover, it should be remembered that the fifth sheath is the reservoir of joy, wisdom and power, and all the other sheaths are triggered by the fifth[5].

There is no question that today's education neglects training of the intellect in all its dimensions, but it also neglects the spiritual element of human beings. People's thoughts are not guided to higher goals of life with the consequence that their latent potentials are not exposed. Only when knowledge, serenity, strength, unselfishness, loving care for others and other qualities become apparent is a person changed from a sensual creature to a genuine human being[6].

A huge expansion of information without corresponding understanding, plus enormous power not tempered with discernment, have rendered education today a potential source of danger. This is a major issue looming huge on humanity's horizon. As Swami Vivekananda observed:

Intellect has been cultivated with the consequence that hundreds of sciences have been discovered, and their impact has been that the few have created slaves out the many — that is all the good that has been done. Artificial needs have been established; and every poor man, whether he has money or not, wishes to have those wants met, and when he cannot, he strives, and dies in the effort[7].

### **3. DISCUSSION**

So far we have addressed education mainly in the perspective of the society that already benefits from education. Vivekananda, however, was a real friend of the poor and the weak, especially the hapless masses of India, and he was the first Indian leader who sought a solution to their problems via education. He believed that a country was progressed to the degree that education and culture reached the people. Unless there was consistent circulation of national blood all throughout the body, the country could not rise. He maintained that it was the responsibility of the higher classes, who had acquired their education at the cost of the poor, to step forward and elevate the poor via education and other methods. In reality, the Swami's goal was for the underprivileged. He once stated, 'there must be equal opportunity for everyone – or if larger for some and for others less - the weaker should be given more chance than the strong'[8].

The tendency in recent years has been to transfer the duty for education from the family, religious organizations, private charities and so forth, to public agencies, especially the State. Yet, in spite of this transfer to the State, education has barely reached the most disadvantaged. As they are frequently victims of hunger, poor sanitary conditions and overcrowded housing, they can barely take advantage of any half-hearted chance that is given[9].

Vivekananda believed that alienation of any sort from the people of society, who are mainly impoverished – whether it be estrangement through study, through money or by power of weapons - undermines the leadership of a country. Therefore, for a lasting regeneration of India, if not for anything else, top emphasis must be given to teaching the people and returning to them their lost identity. They should not only be given education to make them self-reliant, but also concepts, moral instruction and a knowledge of their own historical position so that they may work out their own redemption. Furthermore, they must be provided culture, without which there can be little chance for their long-term development. The Swami was especially concerned about the

degradation of women in India. He was adamant that women must be educated, because he felt that it is the women who shape the next generation, and thus, the future of the nation. In Vivekananda's educational plan for India, the elevation of women and the people got the greatest importance, and his views corresponded to Paulo Freire's notion of conscientization[10].

It is interesting the degree to which there are parallels between Swami Vivekananda's ideas and activities going place one century ago and the current concerns of UNESCO.

- His dedication towards universal ideals and tolerance, his active connection with mankind as a whole.
- The fight in behalf of the poor and needy, to decrease poverty and to eradicate prejudice against women - reaching the unreachable.
- His view of education, science and culture as the vital tools of human progress.
- That education should be a lifelong process.
- And the need to shift away from rote learning.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

There have been numerous changes in the realm of education since Swami Vivekananda passed away one hundred years ago, but not as many changes as in other sectors of society. One such obvious shift in education is that it is now involved in preparing human beings for a new kind of society, and it is attempting to develop a new sort of human being for it. Interestingly, Swami Vivekananda had envisioned a society with a new kind of human being in whom knowledge, activity, work and concentration were harmoniously interwoven, and he suggested a new form of education for attaining this.

The right to education for everyone, guaranteed by the Constitution of India, was Swami Vivekananda's ideal, but it is still a long way from its objective. His concept of continuous, or lifelong, education, however, has been embraced in many nations already. Moreover, because of the adoption of continuous education in these countries, our idea of what constitutes success and failure has altered, raising new hope for the weak, underprivileged section of these societies the very people who for various reasons cannot complete their education when they are young. Vivekananda's call for the elevation of the downtrodden masses, especially of the long-neglected women, has elicited a positive reaction from various sides, yet civilizations adapt education to suit their own requirements, thus frequently depriving the weak of their freedom to choose their own future. Unless fundamental reforms are implemented in all cultures the poor will never be able to elevate themselves. This was a significant worry of the Swami.

He was himself a visionary and an original thinker, Vivekananda pointed out in his first public speech in Asia, on 15 January 1897: But education has yet to be in the world, and civilization - civilisation has started nowhere yet. If we regard civilization to be the expression of the divine in human beings, as Vivekananda imagined it to be, no culture has made much progress so far. This is why we discover that mildness, gentleness, patience, tolerance, compassion and so forth - the hallmarks of a healthy civilization have not taken root in any culture on a significant scale, while we prematurely brag of a global village. The absence of basic needs among the poor all over the globe is no less apparent as the loss of morals among the educated affluent ones. To directly face this enormous task, Swami Vivekananda recommended 'man-making and character-building education'. For this reason, if not for anything else, Vivekananda's views on education need to be carefully re-examined now.

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