

Goethals News

The Goethals Indian Library & Research Society, Kolkata

Vol. XVI

No. 1

Bulletin

January - March 2013

Swami Vivekananda - A spiritual Messenger

1863 - 2013

150th Birth Anniversary

After the death of Sri Ramakrishna in August 1886, Swami Vivekananda gathered all his disciples at Baranagar Math, the new monastery. Ramakrishna Paramahansa had taught his disciples that service to mankind was the most effective worship to God. During his final days Ramakrishna asked Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda) to take care of other monastic disciples and named him as their leader. The disciples underwent rigorous religious practice at Baranagar Math. They used to get up at 3:00 a.m. and become absorbed in 'Japa' and meditation. They developed a strong spirit of detachment.

On December 24, 1886 night, sitting around a fire, Narendranath read the Acts of the Apostles to all the disciples. He exhorted that if St. Paul could achieve so much, so must the disciples of the Math. In the morning they realized it was the birthday of Jesus Christ. In January 1887 Narendranath and eight other disciples took formal monastic vows. They transferred the Baranagar Math to Belur in January 1899.

From 1887 Swami Vivekananda began his journey to explore and discover the spirit of India. He visited Kanyakumari on 24th

By Fr. J. Felix Raj, SJ

December 1892. He had by now traveled extensively across the length and breadth of India, through the jungles, the Himalayas and through large towns and cities. He had met and interacted with a wide cross-section of people – from the maharajahs to the men on the street.

After visiting the temple of



Kanyakumari, he stood on the seashore gazing at the sea. He saw two large rocks some two furlongs away in the sea. Swamiji was seized with the desire to reach those rocks. He asked a few boatmen whether he could be ferried to the rock. Though they were ready, Swamiji realized that he did not have any money on him to give them.

What he did next was something remarkable. He plunged into the roaring waves and swam across. The boatmen were shocked and screamed out to him to return to the shore. They warned him of the stormy waves and the sharks in the ocean. But Swamiji swam safely across and stepped on the rock. He spent three days and three nights on that rock. The roaring ocean was all the company he had. There, sitting on the farthest land of India, he passed into a deep meditation on the present and future of India.

The single-minded monk had become transformed into a reformer, a nation-builder and a world-architect. His soul brooded with tenderness and anguish over India's poverty. What is the purpose of a religion, he thought, from which the masses are excluded?

*So long as millions live in
hunger and ignorance, I hold
every person a traitor who,
having been educated at their
expense, pays not the least heed
to them.*

- Swami Vivekananda

Everywhere and at all times he saw that the poor had been oppressed by whatever power that changes of fortune had set over them.

The dominance of the priesthood, the despotism of caste, the merciless socio-political divisions which these created in the social body, making outcasts of religion the majority of its followers – these the Swami realized as barriers that must be broken down for the Indian nation to progress. His heart throbbed for the masses, great in their endurance. In their sufferings he found himself sharing, by their degradation he found himself humiliated. He longed to throw in his lot with theirs. Agony was in his soul when he thought how those who prided themselves on being the custodians of religion had held down the masses through the ages.

Swami Vivekananda reached Ramnathapuram in 1892 and met the then scion, Bhaskara Sethupati at his palace, and stayed there as the official guest for eight days. Initially, it was Bhaskara Sethupati as the Raja of Ramnad, who had decided to go to US to attend the Parliament of Religions as the representative of Hinduism. But after conversing with Swamiji, he decided that Swamiji was the right person to attend the conference. Vivekananda accepted the Raja's offer.

Vivekananda returned from USA after his grand rendition of the



Swami Vivekananda and his guru Ramakrishna Parmahansa

commandments of his religion, and as he was about to land at Rameshwaram, the overjoyed Raja was waiting with his entourage to give him a royal welcome. Because of the achievement of Swamiji and as well as the great regard the Raja had for him, he bowed his head and offered his shoulders as steps for Vivekananda to get down from the boat. But, Swamiji tactfully avoided this offer, by jumping from the boat to the land.

Then the Raja unyoked the bullocks from Vivekananda's ceremonial chariot and pulled the conveyance manually with his entourage, till it reached his palace. Later he erected a victory pillar of 25 feet high with the message from the 'Upanishad' 'Satyameva Jayate' inscribed to commemorate the success of Swami

Vivekananda at Chicago.

Narendranath's meeting with Ramakrishna in November 1881 proved to be a turning point in Narendra's life. Narendra's account of his first meeting with Ramakrishna:

"Ramakrishna looked just like an ordinary man, with nothing remarkable about him. He used the most simple language and I thought 'Can this man be a great teacher?'

I crept near to him and asked him the question which I had been asking others all my life: 'Do you believe in God, Sir?'

'Yes', he replied.

'Can you prove it, Sir?'

'Yes'.

'How?'

'Because I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.'

That impressed me at once. I began to go to that man, day after day. One touch, one glance, can change a whole life."

Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life - think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success; that is the way great spiritual giants are produced.

- Swami Vivekananda



The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, Kolkata

Swami Vivekananda – a beacon of Light

“Give me few men and women who are pure and selfless and I shall shake the world” - Swami Vivekananda

In a world torn apart by violence, conflicts and acquisitive materialism, Swami Vivekananda's message of selfless social service is an abiding source of inspiration. At a time when the country was reeling under the yoke of colonial domination, Swami Vivekananda opened up new vistas of knowledge and spearheaded the movement towards critical self-scrutiny in order to arouse the latent powers of the soul to committed service to the cause of humanity. In course of his thought provoking lecture at the Parliament of Religion in the Chicago Conference in 1893 he observed “I want to teach you to live the truth, to reveal the light within your own soul”. His words cast a most extraordinary influence over his auditors. It is this 'truth' that he ardently pursued in his untiring journeys to different corners of India and the world. In his extensive travels across the length and breadth of the country, Swami Vivekananda acquainted himself with the reality of the poorest man as he remarked, “Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hand and say, “Here my poor man is there, so help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed but it is the giver ... It is our privilege to be allowed to be charitable, for only so can we grow. The poor man suffers that we may be helped; let the giver kneel down and give thanks, let the receiver stand up and permit ...”

Swamiji did not speak and live a life of obstructions but connected his philosophy to the immediate socio-historical circumstances of his country. His soul-stirring vision of an egalitarian

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society, of the role of youth and empowerment of women have inspired innumerable people on the road to salvation. Swami Vivekananda had dreamt of a social order where the youth would have a special function in channelizing the unharnessed resources of society. During his long pilgrimage in India, he had come to an understanding that amelioration of the condition of the suffering masses will not be possible without the help of the youths. He urges the new generation to zest fully contribute to a greater cause – “Let us all work hard, my brethren; this is no time for sleep. On our work depends the coming of the India of the future. She is there ready waiting ... Arise and awake, and see her seated here, on her eternal throne, rejuvenated, more glorious than she ever was – this motherland of ours.”

At every step of his untiring service to the cause of the downtrodden, Swami Vivekananda emphasized the need to unselfish, to be determined and upright. In this regard, he was deeply indebted to the teachings of his mentor, Sri Ramakrishna who advised his disciples – “Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or

names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization. Only those can understand who have felt. Only those that have attained to spirituality can communicate it to others, can be great teachers of mankind. They alone are the powers of light”.

This vision of social harmony that he imbibed from his teacher, was based on an acknowledgement of diversity and differences in Indian culture, language and religion. He hoped that these pluralities would ultimately blend into a tapestry of soul-uplifting truth. Swami Vivekananda was confident that people of his country could certainly achieve that goal if they could cast aside their fears, suspicious, inhibitions and lethargy. It was certainly possible to respond to the inner voice that urged one to rise above pettiness to commit to a life of service.

According to Swami Vivekananda, spirituality did not reside in religion alone, but in the mantra of service. His social vision encompassed the urgent need to improve the condition of women in the patriarchal social order as he confessed – “There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved.” He also added – “Women in statesmanship, managing territories, governing countries,

even making war, have proved themselves equal to men if not superior. In India, I have no doubt of that whenever they have had the opportunity, they have proved that they have as much ability as men....”

Through his life and ideals, Swami Vivekananda has indeed laid the foundation of an exemplary social and religious legacy which awaits to be realized in the near future.



Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House, Kolkata, is a museum and cultural centre.

Vivekananda, Advaita Vedanta

and the Ideal of a Universal Religion

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'If there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time, which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development'—Swami Vivekananda

As various parts of the world conglomerate to commemorate Swami Vivekananda's sesquicentennial birth anniversary, it is imperative to focus on his central doctrine of the concept of a universal religion. Vivekananda's advocacy of a universal religion was based on peaceful co-existence of various faiths. In his final address at the world's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago on 27th September 1893, speaking on the common ground of religious unity, Swami Vivekananda warned of something that is extremely crucial and relevant in the context of the modern world: "Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity... if any body dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight, 'Assimilation and not destruction', 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension'".

He deeply asserted the necessity of each and every

religion to 'assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.' While espousing the cause of *Advaita Vedanta* in his concept of *The Ideal of a Universal Religion*, Swami Vivekananda asserted the need to manifest the divinity within every human individual through practise of various yogas or paths and be free. This, according to Him is the essence of religion: 'We see that the apparent contradictions and perplexities in every religion mark but different stages of growth. The end of all religions is the realizing of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion'. He further asserted that 'doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books or temples or forms are but secondary details'. That all religions on earth are equally important and significant is evident from this observation of His: 'My idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind. I believe that they are not contradictory; they are supplementary. That universal religion about which philosophers have dreamed is already here.' The focus or epicentre of all religions, according to Swamiji, is one and universal. It is the common goal of all faiths: 'Unity in variety is the plan

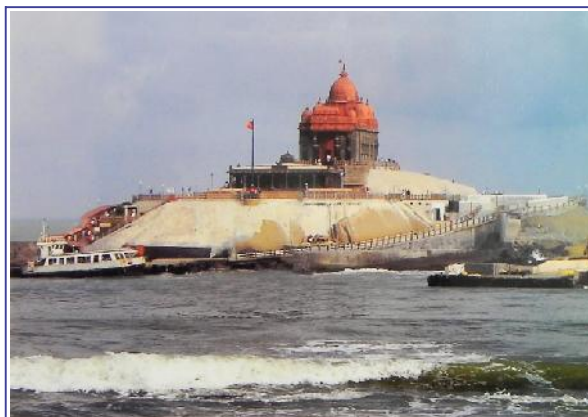
of the universe. If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us must reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our difference will cease.'

Using the analogy of vessels being filled up with water Vivekananda explains further: 'So it is in the case of religion. Our minds are like these vessels and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realization of God. God is like that water filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. Yet he is one. He is God in every case.'

Vivekananda advocated *Advaitism* or the non-dualist philosophy as the most scientific religion. The 'One Infinite Existence, the Brahman' is the centre of *Advaitism*: '*Tattvamasi Shvetaketo—That thou art, O Shvetaketu!*' In his address delivered at Lahore on the 12th of November 1897, entitled *Advaita Vedanta: The Scientific Religion* Vivekananda pointed out: 'Now all these various manifestations of religion, in whatever shape and form they come to mankind, have this one common central basis. It is the preaching of freedom, the way out of this world. They never came to reconcile the world and religion,

but to cut the Gordian knot, to establish religion in its own ideal, and not to compromise with the world. That is what every religion preaches, and the duty of Vedanta is to harmonize all these aspirations, to make manifest the common ground between all the religions of the world.'

The sesquicentennial tribute would be incomplete without efforts being directed in understanding and movement towards implementation of this common sacred goal.



Vivekananda Rock Memorial, a sacred monument and popular tourist attraction in Kanyakumari, India.

Swami Vivekananda : His vision and message

Swami Vivekananda's life (1863 – 1902), though short, gave a tremendous impetus to the spiritual and philosophical forces of the world, an impetus which is just beginning to gather momentum. His thoughts are now becoming more and more relevant today as we are trying to grapple with the thread of unity amidst various doctrines. Indeed, his 'oral' texts years ago, today form the secular texts that outline the social, political, economic and ethical issues of our rapidly changing world. Vivekananda's vision and words are of immense relevance to the existing dynamic world. In this context, four focal themes have been identified. They are –

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1. At the apex is the palpable interconnectedness of all creations, the fulcrum of which is spiritual oneness. Technologically connected, we live with alarming differences. Yet restoration of balance is integral to creation, a restoration achieved in the resilience and unity of spiritual traditions.
2. Each soul is potentially divine'. This potential needs to be actualized. There are even chances that the potential energy could be channeled in ways of incredible political hegemony, economic imperialism and mis – measurement of development in terms of growth, and not equity of access. Yet, if multinational, multicultural business and trade, even 'outsourcing' are the order of the day, it could also be seen as

- a dimension of 'togetherness'.
3. The third vital theme appears to be the Autonomy of each faith. Indeed Swami Vivekananda's Complete Works emphasizes on 'Autonomy of faith'. Each individual, each nation must grow according to their own laws of growth. Vivekananda's perception of unity stems from an awareness of the irreplaceable individual elements of culture and religion. For him, the assertion of unity is not a bulldozing of differences. In that case, the unity achieved, if at all, is an 'anaemic child doomed to dissolution from its inherent impoverishment'. The unity must be organic and not a mechanical admixture of elements derived from text-torturing.

4. The final theme is what Vivekananda described as 'the spectrum of tyrannies' which can see to it that even religion and spirituality function as agents of perpetuating fundamentalism, ideological conflicts, economic irregularities and social imbalances. This is specially the case with economic growth and justice. Vivekananda rightly asked 'Why in India, a man should not have the goods of this life and make money?' Yes, you can. But, then our experience in 'developing' nations shows that, by and large, money is the most powerful weapon from which a whole spectrum of tyranny emerges. In Vivekananda's words, there is 'the tyranny of sages....the tyranny of the Great, the tyranny of the Spiritual, tyranny of the Intellectual and the tyranny of the Wise'. And what more, 'the tyranny of the Wise is much more powerful than the ignorant. The Wise, the Intellectual take to forcing their opinions upon others, know a thousand ways to make bonds and barriers which is not in the power of the ignorant to break'.

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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND NATIONALISM

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Men whom we acknowledge as great thinkers often influence people considerably by the various dimensions of their thoughts. In the case of Swami Vivekananda (or Narendranath Dutta as he used to be known since his childhood), his role as the apostle of spiritual regeneration and religious reawakening, sometimes overshadows the imprints that he left on India's nationalist movements during her colonial days. The unique thing about Vivekananda was that he was not only given to philosophizing about other-worldly things but his thought and speech were rooted in practicality too. Indeed one of the main merits of Swami Vivekananda lies in the fact that his philosophy transcends to the realm of the spiritual but is still grounded in the practical. So if on one hand, he displayed great faith in the monist philosophy of the Vedantas, on the other, he also told young men rather humorously that “you will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of the Gita” thus emphasizing on the importance of concerted action.

“I see that each nation like each

individual has one theme in this life which is its centre, the principal note around which every other note comes to form the harmony.... In one nation political power is its vitality as in England... In India religious life forms the centre, the key note of the whole music of national life and if any nation attempts to throw off its national vitality..that nation dies if it succeeds in its attempt. And therefore if you succeed in the attempt to throw off religion and take up either society or politics or any other thing as your centre, as the vitality of your national life, the result will be that you will be extinct.” These lines almost sum up the Swami's views on the Indian nation. The seven years that Vivekananda spent as a vagrant in India, before the Parliament must have convinced him about the paradox that his country was suffering from - extreme poverty and ignorance on one hand and the excessive amount of spiritual wealth on the other. This paradox impelled the Swami to spend his life trying to infuse life into the nation. It is worth remembering that though Vivekananda displayed great pride in the glorious history of the nation, he was unwilling to allow the Indians to rest on their laurels. He did not want his fellow countrymen to dwell too much in the past.

On locating Vivekananda in the

annals of history we find him spreading his message of nationalism, at a time when public morale was at an all time low. The advent of the West in India had led to the extreme impoverishment of the masses and a general sense of disillusionment had set in among the Indian educated middle class.

The suppression of the Revolt of 1857 had added a further dent on the confidence of the people. It was in this setting that Vivekananda arrived as a messiah of sort to the people of the country, resuscitating their image in the eyes of the world. What is most striking to note is that despite not being very close to politics, Vivekananda's impact was felt on the major nationalists not only of his time but after his death too.

The Swami staunchly believed that nationalism has to be based on the principle of recognition of variety in unity. Every country has a certain mission or theme and subject to that fundamental unity there would be differences amongst its people in religion, customs and language. Despite the temporal differences among Indians they were all bound by a common theme- that of religion or spirituality. The idea of establishing one common religion was myopic and the different sectarian forces of India all radiate from one central idea of unity. On



Ramakrishna Order Headquarters, Belur Math

this very basis thus does Vivekananda chalk out the difference between the nation in India and the nation in Europe. In Europe the race makes the nation, but in Asia people of diverse origin and different tongues become one nation if they have the same religion. This has led some scholars to label Vivekananda as a 'religious nationalist'. In other words, he equated one religious community with a nation. However there is sufficient proof in the form of his writings and speeches that his view of nationalism was not exclusivist because he said that religious all over the world are not antagonistic but complementary in essence.

A striking feature of Vivekananda's take on nationalism is his emphasis on 'action' or on the concept of Karma Yoga. His famous exhortation "Arise, Awake and stop not till your goal is reached... too much of inactivity, too much of weakness, too much of hypnotism has been and is upon our race" is a proof of this. The doctrine of Karma Yoga asked the young to embark as an endless pursuit of selfless action in an unattached way in order to realize their goals. Consequently 'Practical Vedantism' became an offshoot of this concept of Karma Yoga. Only fearless engagement of action could bring to the Indians spiritual and physical liberty. This extreme emphasis on action made Vivekananda look down upon the mendicancy of the most prominent nationalist organization of that time, the Indian National Congress. The radicalism inherent in Vivekananda's nationalist thought did not allow him to view the Congress favorably. The ways of the Congress leaders, their leniency with the British Government and their elitism earned them the wrath of Swami Vivekananda, who looked down on all this as 'political nonsense.' Such was his displeasure with the style of politics that had been adopted by the Congress from the west that he remarked "Do you want that the Ganges should go back

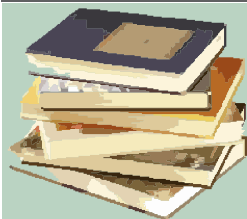
to its icy and begin a new course. Ever if that were possible it would be impossible for this country to give up its characteristic cause of religious life and take up for herself a new- career of politics of something else." This does not however mean that he was completely against the West. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the Swami wanted to inaugurate a nationalist movement based on the high spiritual idealism of India which would assimilate best thoughts and ideas of the Western world. The Swami, however, felt that the nationalism or nation-building of the West had been a failure because it lacked the morals essentially needed to establish a democratic nation and this was something that India traditionally had.

To put the nation in order, Swami Vivekananda talked about a complete project of national regeneration. He saw two major bases of the project being the spirituality of the Indian race and the uncared for masses. The Swami did not think highly of the other social movements that were happening in their times as they only touched a few educated classes.

Though he did not decry the caste system, the Swami saw great potential in the Shudra caste and predicted that no power can hold back the power of Shudra'. Once the masses shed their fears and doubts and each person starts viewing the other as his one brother, there would be no stopping the nation. Thus Vivekananda rested his entire nationalist project on a man making religion or culture, which would produce 'men with strong biceps', full of self confidence and self respect. His entire view on nationalism was based on a staunch emphasis on selfless and fearless action and a common spirit of brotherhood based on the essential unity of all people irrespective of caste, religion or creed which would pave the way for liberty.

It is significant to note that Vivekananda took on such a radical stand on nationalism during the heydays of the Congress when extremist nationalism had not really come to the fore. The impact of Vivekananda's nationalism clearly echoed in the calls of action that were sounded by radical nationalists specially in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal (1905). If the British police reports were anything to go by Vivekananda's writings were 'pregnant with sedition'. Significantly enough the Rama Krishna Mission branches served as nodal points for the extremist nationalist to carry out political crimes. Extremist radical organizations like the Anushilana Samiti treated Vivekananda's works as blueprint of sort and took inspiration from his call to fearless action. During his brief life, Vivekananda made significant impact on prominent nationalists like B.G. Tilak, Rashbehari Bose, Baghalatin and Aurobindo Ghosh. All their revolutionary activities, be it the publishing of 'seditious' articles in newspapers like 'Bande Mataram' or 'Yugantar' or the various forms of direct actions - all seemed to be permeated by the philosophy of Vivekananda. Even the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru lauded the Swami's nationalist efforts in embracing modernity while being proud of his country's glorious past. Clearly, the Swami's influence on the great minds of our country has been of a perennial kind.

'National union in India must be the gathering up of the scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be the union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune.' And it was to this purpose that the Swami devoted his entire life to. Even though 150 years have gone by since his birth, there is no denying the fact that his impact on the minds of the people still remains, clear and firm.



Researchers at Goethals



MAILS & EMAILS

*Excellent.. I would love to spend more time here in the future. **Mrs. Dorothy Mc Menamin**, New Zealand.

*Great! Friendly, rich choice of sources. **Fr. Zoravko Knezevic, S.J.** CRO, Kolkata

D. de Jong & C. Minolehoud on General interest in the D.O.C, Holland.

Deborah Logan on Indian Women Authors/ English, Pre-Independence, USA.

Dr. B. Vanderpol on Dutch in India, Netherlands.

Falisse Philiffe on Belgo – Tagorian Relations, Belgium.

Fr. James Puthuparampil OIC on Church History, Kerala.

Fr. Victor Edwin S.J on Christian – Muslim Dialogue, Delhi.

Fr. Zoravko Knezevic, S.J. CRO, on Jesuit Missionary in West Bengal, Kolkata.

Jacqueung Fardinands on Family History, Australia.

Mou Baneerjee on Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, Kolkata.

Mrs. Dorothy McMenamin on Colonial History esp. Anglo-Indian & Multi-cultural Societies, New Zealand.

Uday Chandra on Tribal History and State Formation in Chota Nagpur, Gurgaon.

Varadarajan Narayanan on Writings of Hiralal Halder, Bangalore.



Researcher at the Research Centre

We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live; they travel far.
- Swami Vivekananda

New Arrivals

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