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SOME ANALYTICAL AND THEORETICAL VIEWS OF VIVEKANANDA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORLD CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda was born in an aristocratic Kayastha family of Calcutta in 1863. His parents influenced the Swami's thinking—the father by his rational mind and the mother by her religious temperament. From his childhood, he showed inclination towards spirituality and God realization. While searching for a man who could directly demonstrate the reality of God, he came to Ramakrishna and became his disciple. As a guru Ramakrishna taught him *Advaita Vedanta* and that all religions are true, and service to man was the most effective worship of God. After the death of his Guru, he became a wandering monk touring the Indian subcontinent and getting a first hand account of India's condition. He later sailed to Chicago and represented India as a delegate in the 1893 Parliament of World Religions. An eloquent speaker, Vivekananda was invited to several forums in United States and spoke at universities and clubs. He conducted several public and private lectures, disseminating Vedanta, Yoga and Hinduism in America, England and few other countries in Europe. He also established Vedanta societies in America and England. He later sailed back to India and in 1897 he founded the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, a philanthropic and spiritual organization. Swami Vivekananda is regarded as one of India's foremost nation-builders. His teachings influenced the thinking of other national leaders and philosophers, like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Aurobindo Ghosh, Radhakrishnan.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

"I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge."—Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda was born in Shimla Pally, Calcutta at 6:33 a.m on Monday, 12 January 1863, during the eve of Makra Sankranti festival and was given the name Narendranath Datta. His father Vishwanath Datta was an attorney of Calcutta High Court. He was considered generous, and had a liberal and progressive outlook in social and religious matters. His mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi was pious and had practiced austerities and prayed to *Visheshwar Shiva* of Varanasi to give her a son. She reportedly had a dream in which Shiva rose from his meditation and said that he would be born as her son.

Narendranath's thinking and personality were influenced by his parents—the father by his rational mind and the mother by her religious temperament. From his mother he learnt the power of self-control. One of the sayings of his mother Narendra quoted often in his later years was, "Remain pure all your life; guard your own honor and never transgress the honor of others. Be very tranquil, but when necessary, harden your heart." He was reportedly adept in meditation and

could reportedly enter the state of *samadhi*. He reportedly would see a light while falling asleep and he reportedly had a vision of Buddha during his meditation. During his childhood, he had a great fascination for wandering ascetics and monks.

Narendranath had varied interests and a wide range of scholarship in philosophy, history, the social sciences, arts, literature, and other subjects. He evinced much interest in scriptural texts, *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. He was also well versed in classical music, both vocal and instrumental and is said to have undergone training under two Ustads, Beni Gupta and Ahamad Khan. Since boyhood, he took an active interest in physical exercise, sports, and other organizational activities. Even when he was young, he questioned the validity of superstitious customs and discrimination based on caste and refused to accept anything without rational proof and pragmatic test.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

SWAMIJI'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO HINDUISM

1. Identity: It was Swami Vivekananda who gave to Hinduism as a whole a clear-cut identity, a distinct profile. Before Swamiji came Hinduism was a loose confederation of many different sects. Swamiji was the first religious leader to speak about the common bases of Hinduism and the common ground of all sects. He was the first person, as guided by his Master Sri Ramakrishna, to accept all Hindu doctrines and the views of all Hindu philosophers and sects as different aspects of one total view of Reality and way of life known as Hinduism. Speaking about Swamiji's role in giving Hinduism its distinct identity, Sister Nivedita wrote: "... it may be said that when he began to speak it was of 'the religious ideas of the Hindus', but when he ended, Hinduism had been created."

2. Unification: Before Swamiji came, there was a lot of quarrel and competition among the various sects of Hinduism. Similarly, the protagonists of different systems and schools of philosophy were claiming their views to be the only true and valid ones. By applying Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of Harmony (*Samanvaya*) Swamiji brought about an overall unification of Hinduism on the basis of the principle of unity in diversity. Speaking about Swamiji's role in this field K M Pannikar, the eminent historian and diplomat, wrote: "This new Shankaracharya may well be claimed to be a unifier of Hindu ideology."

3. Defence: Another important service rendered by Swamiji was to raise his voice in defence of Hinduism. In fact, this was one of the main types of work he did in the West. Christian missionary propaganda had given a wrong understanding of Hinduism and India in Western minds. Swamiji had to face a lot of opposition in his attempts to defend Hinduism.

4. Meeting the Challenges: At the end of the 19th century, India in general, and Hinduism in particular, faced grave challenges from Western materialistic life, the ideas of Western free society, and the proselytizing activities of Christians. Vivekananda met these challenges by integrating the best elements of Western culture in Hindu culture.

5. New Ideal of Monasticism: A major contribution of Vivekananda to Hinduism is the rejuvenation and modernization of monasticism. In this new monastic ideal, followed in the Ramakrishna Order, the ancient principles of renunciation and God realization are combined with service to God in man (*Shiva jnane jiva seva*). Vivekananda elevated social service to the status of divine service.

6. Refurbishing of Hindu Philosophy and Religious Doctrines: Vivekananda did not merely interpret ancient Hindu scriptures and philosophical ideas in terms of modern thought. He also added several illuminating original concepts based on his own transcendental experiences and vision of the future. This, however, needs a detailed study of Hindu philosophy which cannot be attempted here.

Rarely does humanity witness a combination of a great Guru (Spiritual Teacher) and equally capable Shishya (spiritual aspirant) as Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Upanishads and the Gita do mention of such noble pairs, when the fully primed aspirant seeking higher knowledge humbly bows down to the Teacher, and says, "O sir, please tell me 'what is that by knowing which nothing else remains to be known'. Give me that, acquiring which all desires nullify. O gracious one, I surrender at your feet; please tell me what is right for me." And the compassionate Teacher describes the nature of Atman and Brahman, starting as external reality to begin with, but culminating into true knowledge of our inner soul as Brahman. As Guru spoke, so did the aspirant (*Sadhaka*) experience the Truth contained in those words. It was as if a film on Brahman was being run in front of the yearning aspirant. One such pair flourished in the last two decades of nineteenth century, when Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa sculpted the most wonderful masterpiece in the form of Swami Vivekananda out of raw skeptical, rational but fearless and dynamic Narendranath. Their association has unleashed such a tremendous spiritual force that it has already started destroying the dross and dreary ignorance covering the minds and hearts of mankind all over the globe.

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