



Spiritual Masters: Swami Vivekananda

Prema Nandakumar

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About the book:

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), born Narendra Datta, is India's most celebrated and charismatic monk. Handsome, brilliant in studies, an image of contained strength, a lover of music and poetry . . . yet deep inside Narendra the seed of search had begun to sprout at an early age. Unable to understand the superstition-ridden rituals of the Hindu religion and desiring to know about the originating source of his great Hindu heritage, Narendra's search ended when he finally met his guru, Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Vivekananda's brilliant speech at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 brought him fame in India and abroad. In a short life span of thirty-nine years, he propagated the rich Hindu spiritual culture in India and abroad and brought about an awakening among the people of his country. He organised the Ramakrishna Order of Monks that works tirelessly for the uplift of mankind. Swami Vivekananda's inspirational writings, speeches, and vision remain relevant even today and will continue to inspire future generations for all times.

About the Author

Dr. Prema Nandakumar obtained her Ph.D. in 1961 for her study of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem "Savitri". Since then, she has been an independent researcher, publishing critical and biographical works. As a translator, her career spans half a century, with the UNESCO publishing her book on Subramania Bharati. Dr. Nandakumar's translation into English of *Manimekalai*, the ancient Buddhist epic in Tamil, has been received with enthusiasm. She is also a creative writer in English and Tamil.

PREFACE

*Sthapakayacha dharmasya sarva dharma swaroopine
Avatara varishtaaya Ramakrishnaaya te namah*

My maternal grandfather, M.S. Krishnaswami Iyengar, was a very orthodox Srivaishnava. A widower, he would not eat food cooked even by my mother who was his only child. He had to travel a good deal because of his work but never would he eat in a stranger's house. Hotels were taboo. Wherever he stayed (even if he came to our house) he would take out his own well-packed utensils and make a simple meal of rice and dal. If he had no time or place to do his cooking, he would be content with water and fruits.

But apparently he kept his heart open. The two volume edition of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* which he bought in 1920 may be said to be the starting point of Sri Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature in our house. When I contemplate upon the past, I realise that grandfather's purchase of the two volumes of the *Gospel* was auspicious. This was the first non-traditional piece of writing to enter the shelf of our Srivaishnava household. From that day onwards the family library has never looked back in gathering spiritual treasures of our times. As the books came in, they brought new inspirations, joys and fulfillment. Grandfather remained enclosed in orthodoxy but does it matter what he ate or how much he worried about ritual purity or why he painted a gorgeous Srivaishnava tilak on his forehead? He had the curiosity to find out what was inside the *Gospel* which had the subtitle: "The Ideal Man for India and for the World". Later on curiosity turned to regard and respect. That makes this obscure postmaster and millions of disciplined, educated Indians of the last century like him a priceless conduit for the sustenance of our Sanatana Dharma.

That also explains the significance of Swami Vivekananda's life. More than a hundred years ago when educated young men were unable to find a meaning in their lives and remained bound to the discipline of tradition, he came as a leader to show them a royal path which would not alienate them from their tradition and yet bring them to a brave new world. Today's Indian culture is largely the work of Swami Vivekananda. I feel it is the grace of the Divine Mother that has given me this chance to write his biography. It has not been an easy task for the literature is immense and the urge to allow his words to tell the tale can be overwhelming. But it is also like wandering in the world of heroism and valour. Who wants to leave it?

Swami Nikhilananda's biography in English and Swami Ashutoshananda's in Tamil have been my mainstay throughout the planning and writing of this book. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* apart, I have also drawn from the writings of Sister Nivedita, the biography of Sri Ramakrishna by Swami Saradananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by "M" and other books of this area which have nurtured my writing career spanning fifty-five years.

I am grateful to Sonavi Desai for asking me to take up this work for the series on Spiritual Masters, and to Swami Satyaswarupananda for suggesting my name to her. My loving thanks to Nandakumar and my children, Ahana, Bhavana and Raja, for making me forget my age and age-related problems. And to my personal library, a salutation in gratitude.

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8 August 2012

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VEDANTA COMES TO THE WEST

After the epoch-making speech on 11 September, Vivekananda remained an avid listener for the next few days. He spoke again in the afternoon of 15 September. The title itself seems to smile benevolently at the varied concourse: "Why we disagree". The previous speaker had concluded with the words, "Let us cease from abusing each other". This gave the cue to Vivekananda who opened with the story of the frog in the well. How could the audience escape the net of the Indian, dressed in brilliant ochre who yet could discourse with scientific diction and charming wit?

A frog lived in a well. It had lived there for a long time. It was born there and brought up there, and yet was a little, small frog. Of course the evolutionists were not there then to tell us whether the frog lost its eyes or not, but, for our story's sake, we must take it for granted that it had its eyes, and that it every day cleansed the water of all the worms and bacilli that lived in it with an energy that would do credit to our modern bacteriologists.

For Vivekananda it was child's play. This is how he had heard stories from the elderly ladies in his house when he was a child. If the frog in the well is unable to comprehend the ocean vast beyond its experience, how can you blame it for being narrow-minded?

I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world. I have to thank you of America for the great attempt you are making to break down the barriers of this little world of ours, and hope that, in the future, the Lord will help you to accomplish your purpose.

Adroitly the speaker accuses all followers of all religions, including Hinduism, of being frogs in the well. In fact, he points the finger at himself first before turning it towards the others: "I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well." Since he is speaking to a Western audience, he does not reel off remote Vedantic diction but brings in a wee bit of humour in terms of modern science. Here is an Indian monk who is thorough with Western philosophy and sociology: "Of course the evolutionists were not there then to tell us whether the frog lost its eyes or not, but, for our story's sake, we must take it for granted that it had its eyes, and that it every day cleansed the water of all the worms and bacilli that lived in it with an energy that would do credit to our modern bacteriologists."

The "Paper on Hinduism" read out by Vivekananda is of special interest as we need not rely on information like newspaper reports, however accurate. A paper prepared with care, there is an authoritative directness about the argument which gives the essence of Sanatana Dharma, generally known as Hinduism. This is its peerless character of all-inclusive generosity of understanding.

Three religions now stand in the world, which have come down to us from time prehistoric—Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. They have all received tremendous shocks and all of them prove by their survival their internal strength. But while Judaism failed to absorb Christianity and was driven out of its place of birth by its all-conquering daughter, and a handful of Parsees is all that remains to tell the tale of their grand religion, sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the seashore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith.

Naturally this is a very vast area and one has to search for the vital centre of the religion which makes it hold together the varieties gathered through centuries. Bold statements come from him without doing violence to his deep faith in the Vedas as revealed scriptures. This is a religion without a beginning and an end. The scriptures are not merely the four Vedas. An appropriate simile brings us understanding:

But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual world. The moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.

As he proceeds, his wide-spectrum view forgets nothing. Just when a lot of propaganda against the treatment of women in Hinduism was going on in America by interested persons collecting money for “social work” in India, he tells his audience that many of these laws that govern the spiritual world were discovered by the Rishis: “I am glad to tell this audience that some of the very greatest of them were women.” He notes the identical thoughts found in the Vedantic teaching and scientific laws. He will not accept that the all-powerful Supreme is one who makes some people happy and others miserable. It is now time for Vivekananda to posit the Karma theory. Nor need it be thought that we are cut off from our past with respect to memory of what one was in an earlier birth. We just do not make an effort to remember. With his characteristic aplomb, he gifts his audience with another appropriate simile:

This can be easily explained. I am now speaking English. It is not my mother tongue, in fact no words of my mother tongue are now present in my consciousness; but let me try to bring them up, and they rush in. That shows that consciousness is only the surface of the mental ocean, and within its depths are stored up all our experiences. Try and struggle, they would come up and you would be conscious even of your past life.

This is the reason why the Hindu believes that his soul cannot be destroyed by anything; it is “a circle whose circumference is nowhere but whose centre is located in the body and that death means the change of this centre from body to body.” At the same time in its essence, the soul is unbounded, perfect, though matter keeps it in thrall. How has this happened? The Vedic Rishi does not hold the earth-born as a sinner at all. On the contrary, he calls men *amrutasya putrah*, children of immortal bliss. In that bastion of Christianity in America, this young monk holds his own, explaining the basic idea of Hinduism which considers mortals as born pure and perfect! But he does it in a way that would not offend even a bigot.

Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.

At the head of all creation stands the Supreme, one “by whose command the wind blows, the fire burns, the clouds rain, and death stalks upon the earth.” He is found in every particle and atom, yet is He formless. He is Almighty and also he is the All-merciful. The mode of worshipping this Supreme? It is through love. Thus have the Hindu Rishis recognised the all-pervading Universal. The best method of worship would be loving Him unselfishly. Love Him for love’s sake. The conversation between Yudhistira and Draupadi during their exile is narrated to drive home this truth. One must love Him for love’s sake, not make love a trade for getting personal gains. If all this is accepted and that the soul is held in bondage by the body, when will the soul gain infinite happiness? Vivekananda says that it happens when the soul bursts out of the bondage of body and time to a stage generally named, Mukti or Realisation. This release also happens due to God’s mercy, grace. He knows!

How does that mercy act? He reveals Himself to the pure heart; the pure and the stainless see God, yea, even in this life; then and then only all the crookedness of the heart is made straight. Then all doubt ceases. He is no more the freak of a terrible law of causation. This is the very centre, the very vital conception of Hinduism.

In the meanwhile love and grow in that love to higher action and knowledge. Do not stuff your mind with mere beliefs but grow in love not in believing, but in being and becoming.

The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realising one's own higher Self, "not in believing, but in being and becoming." Vivekananda speaks of growing to perfection and becoming one with God enjoying all-bliss. This is not losing one's individuality to become an inert stone. At this juncture, Vivekananda flashes a line from *Romeo and Juliet*: "He jests at scars that never felt a wound." However, growing in perfection and becoming one with God cannot be dismissed as in this line! This is the only way. Even science has proved that there is no such thing as physical individuality. The physical body keeps continually changing. What we must aspire for is soul-unity, an oneness with the Supreme:

Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal. Thus Chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all other could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its services in discovering one energy of which all others are but manifestations, and the science of religion become perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death, Him who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world.

Having spoken so much about the unique and realistic nature of Hindu philosophy, Vivekananda moves on to the problems in and misconceptions about the Hindu religion. The theism of the Hindu religion is actually a worship of the One in His many manifestations. Again a popular adage in English-speaking countries laces the talks: "The rose called by any other name would smell as sweet." And the silliness of Christian preachers criticising Hindus for their large pantheon:

I remember, as a boy, hearing a Christian missionary preach to a crowd in India. Among other sweet things he was telling them was that if he gave a blow to their idol with his stick, what could it do? One of his hearers sharply answered, "If I abuse your God, what can He do?" "You would be punished," said the preacher, "when you die." "So my idol will punish you when you die," retorted the Hindu.

The orator comes to the fore in countering the criticism of Hindus as idol-worshippers given to bigoted rituals. Is there any religion in the world which does not have such groups? Each religion has its own sacrament to help the follower turn his mind godward. To reject it as meaningless is the height of arrogance.

Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. Why does a Christian go to church? Why is the cross holy? Why is the face turned toward the sky in prayer? Why are there so many images in the Catholic Church? Why are there so many images in the minds of Protestants when they pray? My brethren, we can no more think about anything without a mental image than we can live without breathing. By the law of association, the material image calls up the mental idea and *vice versa*. This is why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays.

It is a magnificent defence of Hinduism in its external practices. A scriptural quote in Sanskrit jostles suitably with Wordsworth's "The child is father of the man." Worshipping images is the first stage, the child-stage of a religious life. Neither is childhood a sin nor the worship of images. Fetishism or absolutism, they are all but "so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite". The Hindu realised early that unity in diversity is the nature of life. When making the point about Hindu dharma being non-injury to others, Vivekananda is forthright in his defence of Hinduism:

The Hindus have their faults, they sometimes have their exceptions; but mark this, they are always for punishing their own bodies, and never for cutting the throats of their neighbours. If the Hindu fanatic burns himself on the pyre, he never lights the fire of Inquisition. And even this cannot be laid at the door of his religion any more than the burning of witches can be laid at the door of Christianity.

The Hindu view is a global view where each one of us is travelling to reach the Goal. Facing his learned audience that day in distant America, the ochre-robed Hindu monk spoke with unbending assurance: "I challenge the world to find, throughout the whole system of Sanskrit philosophy, any such expression as that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others. Says Vyasa, '*We find perfect men even beyond the pale of our caste and*

creed.” At the same time he points out that Hinduism is different from Buddhism and Jainism in essentials for they do not believe in God. Vivekananda again uses Christian diction to make it clear to his audience that all religions ultimately hark back to the Supreme. “They have not seen the Father, but they have seen the Son. And he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father also.” Hinduism remains the best spring-board to form a universal religion. The peroration made up of a long sentence clinches the point:

This, brethren, is a short sketch of the religious ideas of the Hindus. The Hindu may have failed to carry out all his plans, but 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; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being, from the lowest grovelling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature.

Vivekananda’s other talks led the audience to wider spaces than religion. He told his listeners that Indians had plenty of religion and right now what they needed was food and yet the Christian missionaries were more interested in saving the souls and not the bodies of Indians. It was not that he was insensitive to the reaction of his listeners but sometimes the bitter pill is needed to rectify a fever-ridden body. Sensing the wide interest in America regarding the advent of Buddha, one of his talks was on the Buddha, though Vivekananda represented Hinduism. For he was no narrow-minded bigot. Always in search of unification, he spoke on Buddhism as the fulfillment of Hinduism in a talk delivered on 26 September. At the very outset he makes it clear that he revered the Buddha as God. Using Christian terminology to great effect, he compares Buddha to Jesus Christ and Judaism to Hinduism. Whereas the Jews crucified Jesus, Hindus accepted the Buddha. Vivekananda considers Buddha as the first missionary, “the first to conceive the idea of proselytising.” But the most important aspect of the Buddha’s manifestation and ministry was his unending compassion for the poor and the marginalised. The time had come to join the intellectual and spiritual achievements of the Vedic stream with the Buddha’s humanising power. So very characteristic of Vivekananda, who ever was tuned to unity among the people of the earth.

Speaking at the final session of the Parliament on the following day, he paid a fine vote of thanks to the participants as well as the “enlightened audience”. Was it all totally smooth, then? Perhaps not, but does it matter? “A few jarring notes were heard from time to time in this harmony. My special thanks to them, for they have, by their striking contrast, made general harmony the sweeter.” Unity of religions did not mean positing one religion as the best or trying to change religions. It is best as it is. We need do no violence to the array of religions in the world. If so, did the Parliament make any point that could be a message for future humanity? Vivekananda said,

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the 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”.

From 27 September 1893 onwards, there was no looking back for Swami Vivekananda. In spite of the hostility of orthodox Hindus and Christians who could not digest his honest criticism of Christian missionary work, the Americans opened their doors wide for him, invited him to speak and flocked in increasing numbers to attend his lectures. This was so even when the Parliament was in progress. We do have some information on those days.

John Lyon was Vivekananda’s host for some days when the Parliament sessions were going on. Lyon’s granddaughter Cornelia Conger was a six year old child then and Vivekananda loved telling her stories and giving vivid pictures of Indian birds like parrots and peacocks.

I used to rush up to him when he came into the house and cry, “Tell me another story, Swami” and climb into his lap. Perhaps, so far from home and in so strange a country, he found comfort in the love and enthusiasm of a child. He was always wonderful to me. Yet—because a child is sensitive—I can remember times when I would run into his room and suddenly know he did not want to be disturbed—when he was in meditation . . . He seemed sad that little Indian girls did not have, in general, the chance to have as good an education as we American children. Imagine how interested I was when Swami Shankarananda, President, Belur Math, told me he founded a girls’ school in Calcutta!

Vivekananda knew that the key to the emancipation of Indian womanhood lay in education. He was also interested in probing other aspects of American life which spoke of success stories. He spent some months in Chicago after the Parliament and utilised them in educating himself and planning his future work in India. Henceforth, it would be a two-pronged life for him. While he would be disseminating Vedanta to an interested audience, he would himself be getting educated in management techniques if he wanted to help his well-endowed people rise from their lethargy and indifference to fellow-Indians. Money would come and his dreams would now get a shape in reality. Vivekananda’s life in America during these months immediately after the Parliament was a yoga of absolute self-control. For, America offered many temptations compared to the poverty-ridden, famine-threatened land where illiteracy, blind superstition and obscurantist practices held sway. But he remained firm to his commitment given to the idealist young men of his land. Because of this anxiety, he first took up the usual method of using a lecture bureau to plan his meetings. Swami Nikhilananda effectively summarises what happened then and how he preferred his freedom to meet, speak and influence people in his own way:

After the meetings of the Parliament of Religions were concluded, Swami Vivekananda, as already noted, undertook a series of apostolic campaigns in order to sow the seed of the Vedantic truths in the ready soil of America. Soon he discovered that the lecture bureau was exploiting him. Further, he did not like its method of advertisement. He was treated as if he were the chief attraction of a circus. The prospectus included his portrait, with the inscription, proclaiming his cardinal virtues: “An Orator by Divine Right; a Model Representative of his Race; a Perfect master of the English Language; the Sensation of the World’s Fair Parliament.” It also described his physical bearing, his height, the colour of his skin, and his clothing. The Swami felt disgusted at being treated like a patent medicine or an elephant in a show. So he severed his relationship with the bureau and arranged his own lectures himself. He accepted invitation from churches, clubs, and private gatherings, and travelled extensively through the Eastern and Midwestern states of America, delivering twelve to fourteen or more lectures a week.

Naturally, this was touched by uncertainty and hard work regarding mundane details. With hindsight helping us, it is clear that each and every step Vivekananda took in America was under the sure guidance of Sri Ramakrishna. More than a hundred years after, we are still documenting how America became Swami Vivekananda’s prime karma-bhumi. Marie Louise Burke had achieved a massive recordation in *Swami Vivekananda in the West*. Asim Chaudhuri has supplemented it with *Swami Vivekananda in America*. Along with his earlier work focussed on Chicago, he takes us to all the places in America that are associated with Swami Vivekananda and gives plentiful information, some of which is revelatory. The way in which families welcomed him with joy is an indication of Vivekananda’s captivating personality. The various houses come alive for us as Asim Chaudhuri says, “He had that rare capacity to brighten up an entire house with his presence.”

The first few months after the Parliament were spent in and around Chicago. One of his hosts was Mr. Elisha Gray. Gray’s career was in inventing electrical equipment, but he was also deeply interested in philosophy and spirituality. While staying with him, Vivekananda gave three talks in the Evanston First Congregational Church., the subjects being Hindu altruism, the monist philosophy and Reincarnation. The *Press*, a weekly of Evanston, reported the speeches. Of the last lecture:

Swami Vivekananda explained his belief in regard to “Reincarnation”. He pointed out the popular error which exists concerning the passing of humanity into animal forms. He said it was a mistaken idea to think that his people were so careful of animals because they thought some former human being was now living in the form of the animal. On the contrary, it is simply a part of their religion to be kind to animals. Reincarnation is either progression, which is advancement to a higher type of manhood, or retrogression, which is the relapse of humanity to a lower plane of living.

One lecture succeeded another in gathering the eminent members of the various societies to welcome Vivekananda. Listeners noted the ratiocinative arguments which occasionally were touched by transcendental flights of thought as also by his “meteoric flashes of superb eloquence”. Not surprisingly some of the best intellectuals around were attracted by these talks. Among them, mention may be made of Charles Bradley and Robert Green Ingersoll. Education had helped the American women to be as active as men. Vivekananda gladly accepted invitations to speak at clubs run by ladies for he could put across the state of the Indian woman and also dream of an India which would have such self-possessed women in the future. Nor did religion ever stand in his way of interacting with the Americans. Churches or Masonic Temple or meeting halls in hotels: he was the same Vivekananda. After about four months in Chicago, he travelled through at least fifteen states of America including Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Tennessee, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and New York.

April 1894 found him in Northampton, Massachusetts. Unlike his previous visit when he was quite unknown, now his coming was often announced in enthusiastic terms. The *Northampton Daily Herald* of 14 April says:

Swami Vivekananda represents the highest type of a race of which new world people of all classes have very inaccurate knowledge and is also one of the noblest representatives of a religious philosophy or system of which the world, its thinkers and teachers and preachers as well as the common herd, also has very little correct knowledge. He has announced to tell us tonight of the “Manners and Customs of India”, but a much wider range of thought than that subject title implies may be expected from this man whom a Boston paper says is “an orator by divine right, whose earnest words and profound learning are in striking contrast to his comparative youth of but thirty-three years”.

Vivekananda did not disappoint Northampton, or any other place he visited and gave lectures. The listeners were spell bound by his mastery of the Bible when he could always come up with other quotes that were more apt than those used by Christian scholars trying to prove theirs as the true religion. For Vivekananda was never against Christianity. It was the preachers who wished to poach upon other religious fields that angered him. He spoke on the subject in Detroit on 11 March:

The furthest that all religions can see is the existence of a spiritual entity. So no religion can teach beyond that point. In every religion there is the essential truth and the non-essential casket in which this jewel lies. Believing in the Jewish book or in the Hindu book is non-essential. Circumstances change; the receptacle is different; but the central truth remains. The essentials being the same, the educated people of every community retain the essentials. If you ask a Christian what his essentials are, he should reply, “The teachings of Lord Jesus.” Much of the rest is nonsense. But the nonsensical part is right; it forms the receptacle. The shell of the oyster is not attractive, but the pearl is within it. The Hindu will never attack the life of Jesus; he reverences the Sermon on the Mount. But how many Christians know or have heard of the teachings of the Hindu holy men? They remain in a fool’s paradise. Before a small fraction of the world was converted, Christianity was divided into many creeds. That is the law of nature. Why take a single instrument from the great religious orchestra of the earth? Let the grand symphony go on. Be pure. Give up superstition and see the wonderful harmony of nature. Superstition gets the better of religion. All the religions are good, since the essentials are the same. Each man should have the perfect exercise of his individuality, but these individualities form a perfect whole. This marvellous condition is already in existence. Each creed has something to add to the wonderful structure.

It was not easy sailing sometimes, because there was opposition not only from some Christians but also from his own countrymen like Pratap Mazoomdar who felt that he did not represent true Hinduism. He wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda:

I was astonished to see and hear these things . . . Mazoomdar slandered me to the missionaries in the Parliament of Religions, saying that I was a nobody, a thug, and a cheat, and he accused me of coming here and pretending to be a monk. Thus he greatly succeeded in prejudicing their minds against me. He so prejudiced President Barrows that he didn’t even speak to me decently. In their books and pamphlets they tried their best to snub me, but the Guru is my help; what could Mazoomdar say?

Indeed, when the grace and protection of Sri Ramakrishna were with him, nothing could touch him nor injure him. Vivekananda simply concentrated on his mission. In any case, his followers in America and India were now increasing in number and were delighted by his successes in raising the flag of Hinduism abroad. Ever an expert in practical management, Vivekananda asked some of his disciples in Madras and Bengal to organise meetings and pass resolutions expressing satisfaction in what he was doing in America. Alasinga Perumal took the lead. A huge meeting was held in Madras on 28 April 1894, and more meetings followed in places like Kumbakonam and Bangalore, thanking Vivekananda for the great service he had done to Hinduism by raising its flag high in the Parliament of Religions. As requested by Alasinga, the Raja of Ramnad sent a cable to America thanking Vivekananda. There were other communications and papers like the *Hindu*, the *Madras Mail* and the *Madras Times* which carried detailed reports of the meetings. All this brought pleasant reaction from the American press. The editorial of *Boston Evening Transcript* of 30 August carried a message of thanks to the Americans from Indian admirers sent to major papers:

Amid all the troubles and humiliations of our past history, in spite of our present fallen condition, we, Hindus, yet retained undiminished our faith in our ancient system of religion, of which the fundamental and central conceptions have been placed before you with such conspicuous power and success by our gifted representative. All of us who have the privilege of knowing personally Swami Vivekananda never felt a moment's doubt that his mission to your great and free nation would prove an entire success and that his genius, enthusiasm, wisdom and eloquence will bear fruit. India is still the home of spirituality, as it was the cradle of the world's civilisation.

This was in tune with what Vivekananda said in lecture after lecture, upholding the Hindu religion with proper pride, but never sounding patriarchal or preacher-like. For one who had been brought up in the philosophy of belonging to "the entire human family" (*Vasudaiva kutumbhakam*), this was not difficult. Reverence for his scriptures never led him to castigate the works held as scriptures by others. At the same time he would never be in the defensive when speaking of the Vedas:

It was written, nobody knows at what date, it may be eight thousand years ago, in spite of all modern scholars may say, it may be nine thousand years ago. Not one of these religious speculations is of modern date, but they are as fresh today as they were when they were written, or rather, fresher, for at that distant date man was not so civilised as we know him now. He had not learnt to cut his brother's throat because he differed a little in thought from himself; he had not deluged the world in blood, he did not become demon to his own brother. In the name of humanity he did not massacre whole lots of mankind then. Therefore these words come to us today very fresh, as great stimulating, life-giving words, much fresher than they were when they were written: "That which exists is One; sages call It by various names." We have to learn yet that all religions, under whatever name they may be called, either Hindu, Buddhist, Mohammedan, or Christian, have the same God, and he who derides any one of these derides his own God.

So too with Vedanta. While he expressed reverence for the Vedas, he was able to interpret the Upanishads clinically to his audience. Using simple words he would explain to the listeners choice Sanskrit words that amazed them at the accurate diction employed by ancient Indian philosophers. We must remember that Vivekananda was speaking to the Western audience at a time when even terms like "dharma" and "yoga" were unintelligible to them. Perhaps the one word that was familiar to them was "karma" due to the preachers referring to the manner in which the Indians had become listless and poverty-stricken, attributing their present misery to their ill-deeds in a past life (karma). Though Indian scriptures were no more a closed mystery for the west, these studies were confined to a tiny group of distinguished intellectuals in countries like Germany and England. The general public had been recently drawn to Indian religion and spirituality thanks to the work of eminent scholars like Max Muller, Robert Caldwell and Monier-Williams. Again, it was at the level of academic scholarship. Vivekananda brought the right mix of scholarship and a preacher's fire which went well with the common man. He led his listeners steadily, in an unperturbed pace but always with a majestic insistence, that they heard him in silence, though they came up with questions and Vivekananda happily answered them. Here is a passage from his talk at the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University in March 1896:

We will now take up the beliefs about mind, soul, and God. According to the universally accepted Sankhya psychology, in perception—in the case of vision, for instance—there are, first of all, the instruments of vision, the eyes. Behind the instruments—the eyes—is the organ of vision or Indriya—the optic nerve and its centres—which is not the external instrument, but without which the eyes will not see. More still is needed for perception. The mind or Manas must come and attach itself to the organ. And besides this, the sensation must be carried to the intellect or Buddhi—the determinative, reactive state of the mind. When the reaction comes from Buddhi, along with it flashes the external world and egoism. Here then is the will; but everything is not complete. Just as every picture, being composed of successive impulses of light, must be united on something stationary to form a whole, so all the ideas in the mind must be gathered and projected on something that is stationary—relatively to the body and mind—that is, on what is called the Soul or Purusha or Atman.

The questions come, one after the other. The answers reveal Vivekananda's mastery of his subject:

Q. What influence had your Hindu philosophy on the Stoic philosophy of the Greeks?

A. It is very probable that it had some influence on it through the Alexandrians. There is some suspicion of Pythagoras being influenced by the Sankhya thought. Anyway, we think the Sankhya philosophy is the first attempt to harmonise the philosophy of the Vedas through reason. We find Kapila mentioned even in the Vedas:

(He who [supports through knowledge] the first-born sage Kapila.)

All this coming from a young man who was just thirty years old! It was a revelation. The answer always matched the question for Vivekananda was alert and certainly not interested in advertising his scholarship. At the Brooklyn Ethical Society:

Q. Do you intend to introduce the practices and rituals of the Hindu religion into this country (America)?

A. I am preaching simply philosophy.

Q. Do you not think if the fear of future hell-fire were taken from man there would be no controlling him?

A. No! On the contrary, I think he is made far better through love and hope than through fear.

This is in keeping with what he spoke in the Society. What is religion but divine living?

If I am God, then my soul is a temple of the Highest, and my every motion should be worship—love for love's sake, duty for duty's sake, without hope of reward or fear of punishment. Thus my religion means expansion, and expansion means realisation and perception in the highest sense—no mumbling words or genuflections. Man is to become divine, realising the divine more and more from day to day in an endless progress.

There were difficult moments too, for just then the missionaries as well as the Pandita Ramabai Group were vilifying him as anti-Christian and a defender of the injustice perpetrated upon widows in India. Lewis G. Janes who attended Vivekananda's Association writes with admiration regarding the poise exhibited by the lecturer when answering questions from the audience:

After the lecture given in the hall of the Long Island Historical Society, in response to a direct question from some person in the audience, the Swami replied temperately, saying that he wished well for the educational work of Ramabai, but dissented from some of the methods which she had adopted for obtaining money in this country.

It was not simply the mastery of Eastern and Western religions and philosophies that impressed the audiences everywhere. Vivekananda avoided bombastic language and never reached out for Hell's fire to destroy the unbelievers and the ignorant. His very personality exuded a royal bearing and his total faith in his Guru gave him an authority that needed no seals. We have many pen-portraits of the speaker and they have uniformly the same

view. Ella Wheeler Wilcox writes of attending his talks in 1894 and in the very first “the impressive orator gave a never-to-be forgotten talk on things spiritual”.

Swami Vivekananda’s activities after the Parliament began with a lecture tour arranged by a bureau but he gave it up as the ways of the bureau did not satisfy him. His new friends in America were ready to help him in his independent status. The whole of 1894 saw him tour the eastern sections of the United States, the wide arc framing Canada in the north and Memphis in the south. Apart from formal talks, he took classes in Vedanta. It was in 1895 that he rented an apartment in New York City and began to teach the four Yogas (Jnana, Karma, Bhakti and Raja). Later he went for a seven week Retreat in Thousand Island Park on the invitation of a disciple, Mary Butcher. His speeches and conversations included Christian scriptures as also Sanskrit texts like Narada Bhakti Sutras, the Avadhuta Gita and the Upanishads. Most of his utterances were recorded by a disciple, Miss S.E. Waldo and have been published under the title *Inspired Talks*. The title is not surprising as another disciple, Sister Christine, says that “he was best in Thousand Island.” It must have been an unforgettable experience to this group with Vivekananda leading them from the known to the unknown. He says on 24 June 1895,

Extreme love to God is Bhakti, and this love is the real immortality, getting which a man becomes perfectly satisfied, sorrows for no loss, and is never jealous; knowing which man becomes mad.

My Master used to say, “This world is a huge lunatic asylum where all men are mad, some after money, some after women, some after name or fame, and a few after God. I prefer to be mad after God. God is the philosophers’ stone that turns us to gold in an instant; the form remains, but the nature is changed—the human form remains, but no more can we hurt or sin. Thinking of God, some weep, some sing, some laugh, some dance, some say wonderful things, but all speak of nothing but God.”

Prophets preach, but the Incarnations like Jesus, Buddha, Ramakrishna, can give religion; one glance, one touch is enough. That is the power of the Holy Ghost, the “laying on of hands”; the power was actually transmitted to the disciples by the Master—the “chain of Guru-power”. That, the real baptism, has been handed down for untold ages.

The disciples must have wondered why there was so much of this religion and that in the world when the truth was as beautiful as this! Even a casual remark from him was apt for the context as well as for meditative thought later. When on 28 June the group went out for a picnic, he happened to say, “Be thankful for all food, it is Brahman. His universal energy is transmuted into our individual energy and helps us in all that we do.” Ah, the Upanishadic statement: Annam Brahma! To this Retreat belongs the honour of Vivekananda’s poem, “Song of the Sannyasin” composed in July:

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee, friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed; and food
What chance may bring, well cooked or ill, judge not.
No food or drink can taint that noble Self
Which knows itself. Like rolling river free
Thou ever be, Sannyasin bold! Say—
“Om tat sat, Om!”

Few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help
Them out of darkness, Maya’s veil. Without
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Say—
“Om tat sat, Om!”

He began giving monastic initiation in the nature-rich Park, as desired by some disciples. Two of them were Marie Louise and Mr. Leon Landsberg, and they received the monastic names, Abhayananda and Kripananda after they took the vows of chastity and poverty.

The call for his lectures began coming from beyond the shores of America too. He went to England and the Continent for three months. He travelled in Paris and came to England where he remained from October to

December in 1895, giving lectures on Vedanta. As everywhere else, Vivekananda came, spoke and conquered the enlightened heart of England. At last, after close to two years labour in the West amid most trying circumstances, Vivekananda saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The number of foreign friends of India was increasing thanks to his inspiring presence.

One of the most famous encounters in India's socio-spiritual history happened here in November 1895.

An Irish woman, Margaret Noble, was a teacher and deeply interested in literature, history and philosophy. Knowing of her interest, her friend Lady Isabel Margesson invited her to a talk by an Indian monk who was creating waves in London at that time. The meeting was held in the drawing room of a rich mansion. When Miss Noble entered the hall, Swami Vivekananda, clad in saffron was seated on the floor, cross-legged. He seemed like royalty and the feeling was enhanced by the rich tone in which he delivered Sanskrit verses now and then, while lecturing in faultless English. She continued to attend his lectures thereafter and put innumerable questions and was satisfied with his answers. While his Vedanta as well as the call to uplift the condition of Indian women appealed to her, Vivekananda found her sincerity, dedication and strength of purpose a godsend for his life's mission. Even after he returned to America, they corresponded. He wrote to her:

Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for Indians, women especially. India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted.

Miss Noble agreed to go over to India. She was initiated by Swami Vivekananda in 1898, took her monastic vows and was given the name Nivedita. Not only did Sister Nivedita take a heroic part in the Ramakrishna Movement initiated by Swami Vivekananda but she was also to inspire countless Indians to work for their motherland and for the emancipation of Indian women. One of them was the famous Tamil poet Subramania Bharati who wrote a gem-like poem on her:

Nivedita, Mother,
Thou, Temple consecrated to Love,
Thou, Sun dispelling my Soul's darkness,
Thou, rain to the parched land of our lives,
Thou helper of the helpless and lost,
Thou, Offering to Grace,
Thou, divine spark of Truth,
My salutations to Thee.¹⁶

Sister Nivedita was to write later on about her first meeting with Vivekananda and how life would have been lost to her if he had not come to the West. She always dreamt of working to achieve something noble but knew not what or how to go about it.

Suppose he had not come to London that time! Life would have been like a headless dream, for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. But if I had known more of life, I doubt whether, when the time came, I should certainly have recognized it.

Fortunately, I knew little and was spared that torture . . . Always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech! And now there is no end to it! As surely I am fitted to my world, so surely is my world in need of me, waiting—ready. The arrow has found its place in the bow. But if he had not come! If he had meditated, on the Himalayan peaks! . . . I, for one, had never been here.

That is the crux of the matter. Vedanta that was nurtured in India for centuries as a unifying philosophy had, thanks to Swami Vivekananda's heroic determination, gone beyond its shores to show the world a way for global unity. He was indeed a one man army out to spread the neo-Vedantic idea of uniting philosophy with social work. Such was his reading of Sri Ramakrishna's mind. The enlightened people of the West were attracted by his message of the brotherhood of man and came to him with offers of such help as they could give. They were all idealistic. And Vivekananda always acknowledged their help in handsome terms. Prime among them were Mr. and Mrs. Hale of Chicago.

When Vivekananda came to Chicago on 9 September 1893, he found himself helpless in locating the Parliament office. George and Ellen Hale found him and became Vivekananda's undeclared guardians. Their two daughters and nieces corresponded with him. Ellen Hale looked after receiving and forwarding his mail, managed his finances meticulously; saw to it that he had proper clothes to suit the wintry and rainy seasons. As Asim Chaudhuri says, "Ellen Hale did every bit of, and then some, for her adopted son," though none of the Hales became his disciples. There was such camaraderie between the family and Vivekananda that he fondly called George as Father Pope and Ellen as Mother Church.

Though Laura Glenn heard Vivekananda lecture in New York only in 1895, she had known about him even in 1893 when a friend who had attended the Parliament at Chicago spoke admiringly of the Indian monk, "who stood out above all others, because of his learning, his eloquence, and his impressive personality." She was already interested in Indian spirituality, had read Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, the Gita and the Upanishads in translation. Reminiscing over her first encounter with Vivekananda's speeches, she says,

A sudden hush, a quiet step on the stairs, and Swami Vivekananda passed in stately erectness up the aisle to the platform. He began to speak; and memory, time, place, people, all melted away. Nothing was left but a voice ringing through the void. It was as if a gate had swung open and I had passed out on a road leading to limitless attainment. The end of it was not visible; but the promise of what it would be shone through the thought and flashed through the personality of the one who gave it. He stood there—prophet of infinitude.

She heard the lectures day after day and chose the path of service. She took initiation and came to India to work in Bengal. She was sent to Sri Ramakrishnananda who had started the Mission's work in Madras. Her book, *Days in an Indian Monastery* is a revelation regarding the power of Swami Vivekananda's lectures and conversations. Rejecting comfort, these disciples came to India with nothing to assure them of their future except total faith in the Guru. And Vivekananda never failed them. Sister Christine Greenstidel was an ethereal entrant to the Ramakrishna fold. When he wanted her to come and work in India, he did not put any varnish on Indian conditions. They corresponded and he wrote once:

I have carefully weighed your plans for coming over. I will be ever so glad to see you, you know it well; but my dear, the Indian summer will not suit you, and if you start now it will be midsummer when you reach India
. . . then all the surroundings are so . . . so wretched and different from what you see around you, e.g. you will find me going about in loin-cloth—will that shock you? Three-fourths of the population only wearing a strip of white cloth around their loins—can you bear that?

This disarming frankness and firmness chased away all the fears in the hearts of his disciples, male and female. Though Vivekananda passed away just three months after Christine came to India, she preferred to stay and do his work, assisting Sister Nivedita in her school. How she made a tremendous success of it is now history. J.J. Goodwin was another great disciple. It is to Goodwin's ability as a near-perfect stenographer that we have such a large amount of Swami Vivekananda's extempore lectures committed to print. Though much younger, he looked after Vivekananda with maternal care by serving him personally and the bond that existed between them was divine. The Leggetts of Ridgely Manor, JosephineMacLeod, S.E. Waldo . . . the list grows long. They all came to help the founding of the Mission with money and voluntary service. Their faith has not gone in vain. Today the Ramakrishna Mission with its global spread is a standing witness to the faith and sacrifice brought by them all to the altar of their guru, Swami Vivekananda.

So the months went by in quick succession as Vivekananda was kept busy with numerous engagements. After the Thousand Island Park retreat, Vivekananda went to London and Paris and returned to America. He gave his famous lecture at Harvard University on 25 March that brought him an offer to occupy the chair of Eastern Philosophy at Harvard. Vivekananda could not be tempted. He politely expressed his unwillingness and went on with his travel. He went to London again in May and stayed for three months lecturing and taking classes. A six-week European tour was followed by three months again in England.

The Motherland was now calling him. He had been energising his disciples from this distance but the time had come to be in person at the site and turn the sod for reconstructing India's socio-religious life. He had been lecturing, taking classes, writing articles on Vedanta for publication and ceaselessly corresponding with his disciples in India and abroad. As 1896 drew to a close, Swami Vivekananda set sail to Naples on his journey

back to India. He was accompanied by the faithful Goodwin and a few more disciples. Swami Vivekananda's first trip abroad, like Adi Sankara's first journey across India's spaces, had been tremendously victorious, a digvijaya. The time for speech was given rest and Sri Ramakrishna's prime disciple began to give the Master's dream a local habitation and a name.