# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universal Prayers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jewel of All Jewels (A Poem)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiv Dhawan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swami Vivekananda's Humanism</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pravrajika Dhiraprama</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivekananda-Vandanam (A Poem)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidhubhushan Bhattacharya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Mantra in Religion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman R. Adams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swamiji's Small Treasures</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The First Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita: Key to Its Universal Appeal

Usha Raghupathy

Indian Culture and Modern India

Prem Ballav San

Brahma-Sutra Bhashya of Sri Shankaracharya—6

Brahman as Consciousness

M.R. Yardi

Fearlessness

B. Ch. Chhabra

Glimpses of a Great Soul, A Portrait of Swami Caradananda (A Review Article)

Kala Mathrani

Sri Sarada Math & Ramakrishna Sarada Mission

Page

25

29

33

38

40

44

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Universal Prayers

The great Truth, the stern Order, consecration, austerity, prayer and sacrifice—these uphold the earth. May that Earth, mistress of what has happened and what will be, give us a wide world to live in.

_Atharva Veda XII. 1.1._

As one home, you, O Earth, sustain people speaking various languages and practising different dharma. May you, like a cow which never refuses to yield milk, make flow towards me a thousand streams of wealth.

_Atharva Veda XII. 1. 45._
The Twelfth of January

The Day Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863 was a Monday, and the date was the twelfth January. The celebrations that are held every year to mark his birthday are according to the date (tithi) of the Indian calendar. Therefore the date according to the Gregorian calendar varies, and few remember January 12. But this year, 1985, it has been made memorable for the youth of India, as the Indian Government declared that, 'January 12, the birthday of Swami Vivekananda, would be celebrated as the National Youth Day every year.'

Inaugurating Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary celebrations in 1963, the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru said:

'What Swamiji has written and said is of interest and must interest us and is likely to influence us for a long time to come. He was no politician in the ordinary sense of the word and yet he was, I think, one of the great founders . . . of the national modern movement of India, and a great number of people who took more or less an active part in that movement in a later date drew their inspiration from Swami Vivekananda. Directly or indirectly he has powerfully influenced the India of today. And I think that our younger generation will take advantage of this fountain of wisdom, of spirit and fire, that flows through Swami Vivekananda.'

Twenty-two years after this pronouncement and thirty-six years after Independence, the Government of India today awakened to the fact that the memory of Vivekananda as a guide, philosopher and friend should be enshrined in the hearts of the young.

The United Nations Organization resolved in 1979 that the year 1985 would be observed as the International Youth Year. In conformity with this declaration, the Government of India launched its programme on January 12 this year. The date was purposely chosen. Inaugurating the National Youth Year, the youthful Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi said:

'We have in recent weeks seen a new surge in the youth of the country. This must be strengthened and carried forward. The youth is always impatient—impatient with procedures, wanting results—and we must work hard towards this. It has now to be seen that the new programmes brought in are such that they build the youth, build the character of the youth and in that character they build Indian culture, Indian traditions, Indian values. Swami Vivekananda's message is
very relevant for the youth, and also the unity and integrity of the country.

These sentiments augur hope that the country will now fulfil Swamiji’s words spoken eighty-eight years ago:

‘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 waiting. She is only sleeping. Arise, and awake and see her seated here, on her eternal throne, rejuvenated, more glorious than she ever was—this motherland of ours.’

His first thought naturally was to serve his country. For six long years, therefore, he travelled all over India, racking his brain all the while to find out what shape his mission of succour to humanity would take. Before leaving on his long journey in July 1890 he bowed down low to the Holy Mother and said, ‘Mother, I shall not return until I have attained the highest knowledge.’ He told his brother disciples, ‘I shall not return until I acquire such realization that my very touch will transform a man.’ He acquired both knowledge and the power needed to transform society.

It would be wrong to say, however, that Swamiji came for India alone. Like the clarion call of the Vedic Rishi who said: ‘Listen all of you, sons of Immortality, who dwell in the world. . . .’ Vivekananda’s teachings were for people the world over. As a matter of fact, his teachings touched the hearts of the people of the West first. They experienced the power of his living spirituality before Indians did. That event, which is described by one writer as ‘the greatest event of the nineteenth century’ makes an enthralling story.

The Power of Living Spirituality

Out of nowhere, as it were, there suddenly rose in America the giant figure of a ‘Hindu Yogi’—Swami Vivekananda. In 1893, uninvited and without credentials, he arrived in Chicago to attend the Parliament of Religions. Had Professor John Henry Wright of Harvard not met him and introduced him as ‘a well-qualified delegate—one who, like the sun—had no need of credentials in order to shine’—he would not have been able to attend the Parliament at all. But God’s will reigns supreme.

On September 11, 1893, the Parliament of Religions began in Chicago. Swamiji arose to address the Parliament in the afternoon session. His opening words, ‘Sisters and brothers of America’ was
followed by a long applause. When he finished his short address, he had conquered the hearts of the American people. A quotation from just one newspaper, the Boston Evening Transcript shows how he was received there:

‘Vivekananda’s address before the parliament was broad as the heavens above us, embracing the best in all religions, as the ultimate universal religion—charity to all mankind, good works for the love of God, not for fear of punishment or hope of reward. He is a great favorite at the parliament, from the grandeur of his sentiments and his appearance as well. If he merely crosses the platform he is applauded, and this marked approval of thousands he accepts in a childlike spirit of gratification, without a trace of conceit.’

His cyclonic tours of different states in the United States of America drew people to him. His Chicago hostess, Mrs. Hale, feelingly recalled Swamiji as,

‘... the great and glorious soul that came to the Parliament of Religions, so full of love of God, that his face shone with Divine light, whose words were fire, whose very presence created an atmosphere of harmony and purity, thereby drawing all souls to himself.’

In her stupendous work, Swami Vivekananda In America: New Discoveries, Gargi (Marie Louise Burke) in unambiguous words writes:

‘Swamiji’s message was spread far and wide. In one guise or another it became known to the people, and it cannot but be supposed that a surge of genuine religious feeling came as a result of this great current of fresh thought from the East, which was given with the full vigor of a spiritual power such as the world has rarely known. Such power moves silently and invisibly but surely, working on all levels, churning the surface into a foam, as well as altering forever the deep, hidden currents of the spiritual life of a whole people.’

‘The power that emanated from this mysterious being was so great that one all but shrank from it. It was overwhelming,’ wrote Christine Greenstidel (Sister Christine) who never missed a single lecture of Swamiji’s in Detroit.

On England’s horizon the names of Margaret Elizabeth Noble (Sister Nivedita), Goodwin and the Seviers shine bright in the history of Vivekananda’s world-mission. They heard in his lectures the call that changed their lives and they left their homes to live and die for India. But there were also innumerable other people in the West whose lives
were rejuvenated by Vivekananda's power of spirituality. To quote Nivedita's words:

'To not a few of us the words of Swami Vivekananda came as living water to men perishing of thirst. Many of us had been conscious for years past of that growing uncertainty and despair, with regard to Religion. ... and we had no tool, such as we now hold, by which to cut away the doctrinal shell from the kernel of Reality in our Faith. To these, the Vedanta has given intellectual confirmation and philosophical expression of their own mistrusted intuitions. "The peoples that walked in darkness have seen a great light."

We have it on record that the spiritual power of this 'mysterious being' penetrated even Australia, where Vivekananda had never been. Though the following incident, which reads like fiction, occurred at a much later date, it is relevant to mention it here. James Wales, a mason by trade, living about two hundred miles from Sydney, felt the yogi's power working within him—years after Vivekananda had left his mortal coil. In 1925, on his birthday, James Wales set out to buy wine for entertaining his friends at a dinner party. While returning home, after buying the wine, he had the vision of an Indian yogi and the one word that accompanied the vision was: VIVEKANANDA. Somewhere within his deep unconscious, Wales received the message of the yogi: he should change his way of life; a heavy drinker and debauchee had to become a seeker of Truth. James Wales did become one.*

His Guru's Mission

It is surprising to find, as we have said, that Vivekananda touched the cords of the hearts of people outside India earlier than those of his own countrymen. This proved that his work would not remain confined within his narrow domestic walls, but would encompass the whole world.

From being a contemplative child whose favourite game was 'playing meditation' and who always saw a bright light when he went to sleep—how and when did Swamiji become a "cyclonic yogi"? His guru, Sri Ramakrishna, described Vivekananda as 'an adept in meditation'.

and yet he did not hesitate to declare that 'Naren will one day be a world-teacher'. After Vivekananda's experience of nirvikalpa samadhi Sri Ramakrishna told him: 'The Mother has shown you everything. Just as a treasure is locked up in a box, so will this realization you have just had be locked up and the key shall remain with me. You have work to do. When you have finished my work, the treasure box will be unlocked again; and you will know everything then just as you do now.' It can be said, therefore, that hearing his Guru's instructions, Vivekananda understood that the path of withdrawal from the world was not for him. He had to enter the arena of action, struggle and strife. He had to tread the path of stern self-discipline and austerity to inspire the world. And this he did. Even towards the end of his life he said, 'I will do the very best myself, and infuse my spirit in others to continue the work. No rest for me! I shall die in harness! I love action! Life is a battle, and one must always be in action... Let me live and die in action!'

The Response of Indian Youth to Vivekananda's Call

In 1897 when Swami Vivekananda returned to India, the whole country rose as one man to welcome him. They had not yet heard the message of Vedanta directly from his lips—but it had floated down to them through news agencies, reports and letters. But the hero came and said, 'My India, arise! Where is your vital force? In your Immortal Soul. . . . what our country now wants are muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic wills, which nothing can resist, which . . . will accomplish their purpose in any fashion, even if it meant going down to the bottom of the ocean and meeting death face to face.' This call awakened the Indians.

Though old in wisdom, Swamiji was thirty years old when he left the shores of India in 1893. On his return four years later, Swamiji desired to see the young men of his country well-educated, full of hope, firm in mind and strong in body. But when he saw their pale, haggard faces, and dismal outlook on life his heart overflowed with love for them. He told them:

'Be strong, my young friends; that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of the Gita. These are bold words, but I have to say them, for I love you . . . . You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory
Swami Vivekananda in 1893.
Swami Vivekananda in Chicago
of the Atman, when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men.' ‘It is man-making religion that we want . . . . It is man-making education all round that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. And here is the test of truth—anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison, there is no life in it, it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening. Truth is purity, Truth is all-knowledge . . . Truth must be strengthening, must be enlightening, must be invigorating.’ ‘Come, be men! Come out of your narrow holes and have a look abroad. See how nations are on the march. Do you love man? Do you love your country? Then come, let us struggle for higher and better things.’

Many young people took to Swamiji’s health-building programmes by joining gymnasiums, where exercises, boxing, lathi-khela and so on were taught and practised. His strength-giving message inspired young people. Some joined his plans for fostering national education; some prepared themselves to serve their motherland; some young men left their homes and joined his monastic army of ‘sappers and miners’ for the spiritual regeneration of their motherland. In all these three aspects of his work, his teachings formed a constant ingredient in the mental and moral make-up of the youth of India.

Among hundreds of young men who, after Swamiji, became the torch-bearers of his message of renunciation and service, was Swami Vireswaranandaji, the tenth President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. He joined the Ramakrishna Order at the age of twenty-four, and at the ripe old age of ninety three, stood firm as a pillar of strength and solicitude for thousands of people. On March 13, 1985, however, the light that shone in that frail body went out and his bodily presence was removed from us.

Sri Sarada Math is very much indebted to Swami Vireswaranandaji for the keen interest he took, along with other senior monks, in starting the Women’s Math on the occasion of Holy Mother’s birth centenary. From the very beginning he guided the members of Sri Sarada Math in many ways, and showered his love and blessings on them. He visited almost all the centres of Sri Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission. When, under the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, a centre for tribal girls was started in Khonsa (Arunachal Pradesh), he took the opportunity to visit it when he was touring that state. When the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission started two centres in the remote villages of Shillya and Thakurnagar in the Burdwan and Medinipore Districts in
West Bengal he was happy. He visited the Thakurnagar centre in June 1984 when he was on his way to a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in the Medinipore District.

With the passing away of Swami Vireswaranandaji Sri Sarada Math has lost a well-wisher whose memory will ever be cherished by all the members who have come in touch with him. Sri Sarada Math offers here its homage to this great soul who will remain a source of inspiration to it for many years.

During the last few years his greatest interest lay in arousing the youth of this country to the consciousness of their own inner strength and duties towards the suffering masses. He told them:

'If the country has to be saved from its present degraded state the only path open before it is the one showed by Swamiji. So you have all to rally round him. It is a waste of time to search for a solution elsewhere. India has to be rebuilt on Indian ideals, the ideals that Swamiji has kept before us. You should study Swamiji's Complete Works and become acquainted with his ideas and ideals.'

When Swamiji’s birthday on January 12th was declared as the National Youth Day, Swami Vireswaranandaji was full of joy. Old age and fatal illness could not prevent him from addressing a mammoth meeting of young men and women on January 12, 1985—his last public appearance. He told the gathering:

'Swamiji had great expectations from you. He said that he had left all his thoughts and plans in the hands of the youth. Swamiji believed that the youth would shoulder the responsibility of continuing the work initiated by him. I hope you will not disappoint him. Vow, then, today to dedicate yourselves to the work of Swamiji and carry the nation forward along the path shown by him.'

Thus from his lighted torch Swami Vireswaranandaji lit the torches of the youth of today so that they may give practical effect to Swamiji’s teachings and find fulfillment in their lives.
The Jewel of All Jewels

SHIV DHAWAN

High above the drifting clouds sat seven starry sages sublime
submerged in meditation profound, unmindful of the passage of time.
In this serene Ocean of the Self, was felt a ripple of joy,
as sailing through the Ether came a lovely little chubby boy.
Glowing with an innocent smile, he lovingly hugged one of the sages,
as if greeting an old friend he had not seen for ages.
Hearing someone call, the contemplative sage opened his eyes to see,
a little boy lisping. 'I'm going, you will have to come with me.'

The hoary sage steeped in Timelessness, slowly turned his head,
and gazing upon the earth, agreed to do what was said.
The child was born as Sri Ramakrishna, the mystical God-man,
the sage was Swami Vivekananda, the crusading philosopher, fulfilling
a cosmic plan.

On the 12th January 1863 the veil of superstition was torn asunder,
with the birth of Narendranath, a clap of spiritual thunder.
While other children of his age romped about boisterous and gay,
Naren’s favourite game was ‘Let us all sit to meditate and pray.’

Throughout his life Naren was utterly truthful, outspoken and bold,
being sceptical, he always tested the truth of what he was told.
A bright student, he soon mastered physics, philosophies and
metaphysics profound,
and thirsted for a glimpse of That in which all things are found.

Seeing at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna’s divinity, he was overawed,
and as was his wont, raised the query, ‘Sir, have you seen God?’
Thakur admitted he often saw God, as clearly as he was seeing the boy,
a fact which caused the young Naren’s heart to leap with joy.

This was the cue to set out on his spiritual travels,
jolting the tāmasic masses, and forcing the nation back on her rails,
Shaking off his worldly mantle, Naren blossomed under Thakur’s
 tutelage,
to become after his Master’s samadhi, Swami Vivekananda, that
effulgent starry sage.
One is placed in circumstances, 'tis our destiny, but still, how we face life is in our hands, it is free will. Swamiji taught us never to mind failures, the poetry of life, Only rational beings have struggles, no stone has been known to have strife.

He believed man must have faith in himself and be fearless within, strength was life, strength was immortality, weakness alone was sin. Comparing fear to a horde of restless monkeys, Swamiji did say, 'Stop! go on, face the brutes... and see how they run away.'

He even crossed three seas to attend a Parliament of Religions, where he lectured at length on the concept of the Divine One. There, comparing the opulent West with Indian poverty, the patriot weeping bitterly said, 'Who will raise the masses of India, Mother, who will give them bread?'

Some say he is a social philosopher, some that he discusses matters sublime,
'tis strange how men condition that which is beyond space and time. He was like a lighted buoy out on the turbulent samsaric seas, call him what you will, he only showed mankind the way to be free.

In recent times in India, it was Vivekananda alone who preached a great message which is not tied to any do's and don'ts. Addressing one and all in the nation, he said: In every one of you there is the power of Brahman; the God in the poor desires you to serve Him. This message has roused the heart of the youths in a most pervasive way. That is why this message has borne fruit in the service of the nation in diverse ways and in diverse forms of sacrifice.

Rabindranath Tagore
Swami Vivekananda’s Humanism

Pravrajika Dhirapranā

Swami Vivekananda placed before mankind the highest ideal of the oneness of all beings, leading to universal equality and amity. He initiated the service of the individual, by looking upon him as God. This was a remedy for the great ills of inequality, hostility, untouchability and the like, that eat into the vitals of social and religious life and even small acts of daily life. To preach this great ideal to the world and indicate the means of its fruition is the end and aim of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission as well as Sri Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission.

Only through Swami Vivekananda are we truly able to understand Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. When Swami Vivekananda, the Yugacharya, the teacher of the age, was a boy called Narendra, he went to his Guru and requested him to bless him so that he may enjoy nirvikalpa samadhi. Hearing his request, Sri Ramakrishna became very grave and told him that he was born to help the whole world, especially the miserable and the suffering, to cross the ocean of samsara. He added that instead of enjoying nirvikalpa samadhi he could enjoy the same bliss by seeing God in all creation. He asked Narendra whether he would fulfil this mission or not. Narendra admitted that on that day his eyes were opened.

Swami Vivekananda’s life story is phenomenal. He was an ideal yogi and monk, teacher and leader, mystic and ascetic, worker and philosopher. He was capable of the most exalted devotion and possessed the highest knowledge. He was a dedicated humanist, a musician, an orator and an accomplished athlete. In him one catches a glimpse of a perfect man. Sri Ramakrishna said about him—'Narendra is a great soul—perfect in meditation. He cuts the veil of Maya to pieces with the sword of knowledge. Inscrutable Maya can never bring him under her control.'

The history of Swamiji’s life is correlated with the awakening of India and the resurrection of Indian religion. A nation that seemed to have lost all self-respect and self-confidence and which was apparently dead, had to be roused. That was a tremendous task. Very often Swami Vivekananda would say he was born with the mission to serve

Pravrajika Dhirapranā is the President of Sri Sarada Mandiram, Trichur, Kerala.
and rejuvenate his country. Even till the last day of his life he worked
for the fulfilment of this mission. He said, 'For the next fifty years this
alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. This is the
only God that is awake, our own race, everywhere His hands, every-
where His feet, everywhere His ears. He covers everything. All other
Gods are sleeping.'

Arousing the Masses

Swamiji was a militant monk and a dynamic personality. His
vision was clear and far-reaching, showing him how India could be
roused from the slumber in which she had been for centuries and how
the masses could be elevated. The desire to serve the people, the longing
to better their condition, is the real religion of the present day. Education
in India has to be man-making and thereby nation-making. Indians
must be proud of their own ancient and glorious culture and civilization,
about which they are ignorant. Swamiji repeatedly said, 'If our culture
is lost India is lost and at large the whole world.' It is the duty of
Indians to keep their culture ever fresh, to stand firm on it and assim-
late any other culture if it is good.

In the words of Vivekananda's disciple, Sister Nivedita—'Hunger
for the good of others—as an end in itself—the infinite pity that wakes
in the heart of an Avatara at the sight of suffering humanity are the seed
and root in nation making.' We can see this hunger and this infinite
pity, this love for the poor, the ignorant and the destitute in Swamiji's
life. He said, 'The degeneration of India came not because the laws and
customs of the ancients were bad, but because they were not allowed to
be carried to their legitimate conclusion.' 'The West is groaning under
the tyranny of the Shylocks, and the East is groaning under the tyranny
of the priests; ...' And he warned, 'Keep the motto before you,
'Elevation of the masses without injuring their religion'.' Once Swamiji
wrote to his disciple, Alasinga Perumal, 'My heart is too full to express
my feeling; you know it, you can imagine it. So long as the millions
live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor, who having
been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them.' Swamiji
was ready to undergo any amount of suffering if he could wipe away
the suffering of the poor and the ignorant. He wrote, 'So long as
even a single dog in my country is without food, my whole religion
will be to feed it.' He adds, 'May I be born again and again, and
suffer thousands of miseries, so that I may worship the only God that
exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.'

Education

Education was the only panacea that Swamiji found for India's ills. He wrote, 'Through education comes faith in one's self and through faith in one's own self the inherent Brahman is waking up in them, while the Brahman in us is gradually becoming dormant.' By education Swamiji meant something far superior to the education that is given today. He said, 'We must have a hold on the spiritual and secular education of the nation. . . . The education that you are getting now has some good points, but it has a tremendous disadvantage which is so great that the good things are all weighted down. In the first place it is not a man-making education, it is merely and entirely a negative education. A negative education or any training that is based on negation, is worse than death.' 'Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library.'

Nivedita gave a positive interpretation to Swamiji's words. She wrote:

'We must surround our children with the thought of their nation and their country. The centre of gravity must lie, for them, outside the family. We must demand from them sacrifices for India, Bhakti for India, learning for India. The ideal for its own sake. India for the sake of India. This must be as the breath of life to them. We must teach them about India, in school and at home. Some lessons must fill out the conception, others must build up the sense of contrast. Burning love, love without a limit. Love that seeks only the good of the beloved, and has no thought of self, this is the passion that we must demand of them.

'We must teach them to think heroically. . . . It is a mistake to think heroes are born. Nothing of the sort. They are made, not born; made by the pressure of heroic thought.'

This heroic thought can be cultivated only by thorough education and that too, through real man-making education.
Vivekananda said to Indian women that they should light up the lamp of knowledge within themselves, gain the strength arising from knowledge and become fearless, compassionate and large-hearted and acquire practical efficiency. Thus we see that Swamiji was eager to give proper education to women and thereby rouse India socially, culturally and spiritually. He used to say, ‘With five hundred men the (educational) conquest of India might take fifty years, with as many women, not more than a few weeks.’ All this can be achieved only through love and unselfishness. Swamiji tried his best to teach the Indians how to live in the true sense of the term, that is, by living for others and using resources such as money, knowledge and talents to serve the common people. ‘For the sake of one’s own liberation and for the welfare of the world’, was his motto. He once wrote to the Maharaja of Mysore, ‘Life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.’

Selfishness and self-centredness and the evils following from them were the causes for the degradation of India. Indians must now possess this passion, ‘This is our nation, these are our people’. We must do whatever we can to develop the manhood and womanhood of our vast population. Self-sacrifice and not self-assertion is the highest law of the universe. No nation can become great or achieve prosperity without its people developing a sense of self-discipline, social responsibility, capacity and willingness to do hard and efficient co-operative work.

Dharma and Law

At the end of the Bhagavad Gita it is said: ‘Wherever there is Krishna, the Master of Yoga and Arjuna, the wielder of the bow, there, in that society shall be found wealth, victory, general welfare, unwavering justice and ethical behaviour.’ This verse refers to the confluence in each person of two energies needed to achieve total human welfare. The first is the energy of Yoga, the energy of vision, of calm spirituality represented by Sri Krishna. The second is the energy of intense and efficient action represented by Arjuna, the hero of action. This philosophy of the Gita is the same as the concept in Chinese Taoism of the state of being sagely within and kingly without. Herbert Spencer in his study of sociology calls it uniting
philanthropic energy with philosophical calmness. This is the true aim of education.

Dharma is presented by Indian philosophy as the principle that integrates man with man in society. It is basically a byproduct of the spiritual growth of the individual citizen, which is expressed as a moral law and which is reinforced by the state laws and regulations. Respect for moral law and the constant effort to uphold it create integration, strength and stability in a democratic state. It is the awakened moral sense in the citizen that expresses itself in human values which makes the laws and regulations of the state effective. If moral sense is absent, laws become ineffective as the citizens twist the laws to suit their own advantage. To develop morality, the dignity of the self should be awakened. Swamiji’s call to the youth is: ‘You, the children of Immortal Bliss, be aware of yourselves and beware of this world. You have nothing to fear in this world if you go along the path of dharma and righteousness. Be bold and stop not till the goal is reached.’

Swami Vivekananda, in a mood of profound ecstasy, prophesied, ‘the spiritual upsurge of the present age will continue unabated for the next seven or eight centuries. What you see now is only the prelude.’ The truth of this statement is being realized now day by day.

The going forth of Vivekananda, marked out by the Master as the heroic soul destined to take the world between his two hands and change it, was the first visible sign to the world that India was awake in religion, it was only a matter of time and opportunity for it to throw itself on all spiritual and intellectual activities in the national existence and take possession of them.

Sri Aurobindo
विवेकानंदाद्वननम्
श्रीविष्णुसङ्क महाजायः

अत्यः भूमां चिरभिलब् जुलहदयः
सहें यः सर्वं विषयजसुः तुन्ज्यमकरोऽतुः।

महारोदं तेजोरूपां खलु निर्माणमहसः
विवेकानदालयं स तपनसमानं भक्तितले॥

अस्त्यं यद्विष्णुमेव प्रयणितमहो सत्यमिति तम्
कठोरा यद्वाणो भ्रमणपन्यः वजस्वरः॥

यदार्थविवचः स्याद् भूविन्नवमहाजागरणकुलः
स वीरः संवासी समुद्र शरणं सिद्धार्थम्॥

महेर्षवर्म भोमः स्वयमुपगतं यथं सविधे
ङ्च चिते चाचचर्यं अनमितुमसते प्रभवति॥

तपस्वी वेणायप्रकटितमहात्म्यागमरहिमा
स वीरः संवासी समुद्र जगदाधारितः॥

प्रवाहः सौभोगिप्रतिपदसत्यश्चवियो
दशानो विक्षुद्धोदिधिपरितस्त्रीमोनिधिताम॥

महोधोषो दृष्टो वक्तपनलतेजः परिगतः
प्रवाहातः पवानं दिशातु भूविन् दूस्तः तदनं॥

अनास्ततद् विवेषे पुनरथ जगमरङ्गते
परिविष्णुष्टान्नक्रनक्रणविधो भिन्नतनरः॥

किती सर्वं जीवो विधुत्तनुनारायण हृतं
सदा स्मारे स्मारे बहुस्तिरकरं कर्म कुलवान्॥

पुरस्तादू राजन्त भिन्विवध्व्रुः परविष्णुः
विन्यायं कस्मनु भ्रमसि च तदन्वेष्यतरः॥

दयां कुर्याद् जीवे य इह जनसेवात्त्वहः
स एवेशं मितं जगति परिशेषेत् मनुः॥

The late Pandit Bidhubhusan Bhattacharya was Professor of Sanskrit at the Calcutta and Jadavpur Universities, Calcutta.
The Role of Mantra in Religion

Norman R. Adams

Scholars shy at trying to define religion. It is such a vast subject, there are so many different kinds of religion—what is it brings them all under one rubric? What is it gives them unity and thus allows them to enlighten us about humanity and the human process? Or is there anything religions everywhere together affirm and practice as evidence, perhaps, of a higher truth and a deeper reality than that of the everyday round?

Instead of a theoretical definition of religion, it seems better to ask, what do religious people—i.e., those who call themselves religious or whom others call religious—do? What do they experience? What kind of mode-of-being-in-the-world do they assume? What is their life-style, to use a current phrase?

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First, they are aware of mystery. They see living as inherently mysterious, rather than something a little more scientific knowledge will clear up. That is to say, living is for them a matter of wonder and the experience of awe. Isaiah found this in the Temple at Jerusalem. He saw 'the Lord, high and lifted-up'. Arjuna found it in the Chariot at Kurukshetra: 'If in the sky a thousand suns suddenly burst forth, that light would hint at the light of that exalted being.' Both Isaiah and Arjuna discovered the presence of the Holy. Both were frightened as well as elated: religion is not necessarily happy. It does induce wonder and awe.

Secondly, religious people have 'faith'. Faith is a slippery word, since there are many definitions of it. Here let us define it as trust or confidence. The Christian theologian David Tracy has written: 'The religious themselves fundamentally ask us to allow the experience of trust and confidence in the final graciousness of reality to provide the basic orientation to our lives.' Just the idea of having a 'basic orientation' is a fruitful idea. It suggests that the mode-of-being-in-the-world which religious people adopt involves testing each relationship in terms of coherence with one point of view—that reality is 'gracious'. Or, to change the figure, a new centring comes to religious people, just when they were distraught, diffused, decidedly uncentred. It is not surprising that they become optimistic, although not shallowly so.

Thirdly, ethical practices grow out of religion in such a way that morality becomes an integral part of it. Religious people have a way of behaving, a life-style based on their awareness of mystery and on their faith. Isaiah's epiphany brought him to see how sinful he was and how sinful his people were in contrast to the purity of Jahweh. Arjuna's epiphany brought him a realization of his duty in the war about to take place. The Buddha set forth in his eightfold path a very definite morality which grew out of Enlightenment and leads to Enlightenment. By faith in the reliability of Jahweh Abraham left his home to establish in the wilderness a new home and a new people. And James in the New Testament says that faith without right actions is dead. A supreme trust in Allah has motivated the behaviour of Muslims for many centuries.

There is a fourth factor in the life-style of religious people, their tendency to formulate doctrines or creedal statements, in other words to intellectualize the experiences of mystery, faith and ethics. What do these three imply about the nature of reality? What philosophy do religious people hold? Here there is much disagreement, since conceptuality
is one step removed from experience. We shall here omit treatment of this fourth factor, in order to stay close to the sources of religious experience.

But a fifth factor, ritual, comes back to experience and deserves our further attention, since in the form of mantra ritual has a special relation to the other three—mystery, faith and morality. Ritual is indispensable in religion because people talk about their experiences of wonder and awe, their experiences of faith and their ways of behaviour. They talk about them, sing about them, utter prayers and chants. These responses clarify, fortify, energize, comfort. They ‘put it all together’, give articulation to life-styles, mould and perpetuate vital habits of remembrance and usage, suggest new ways of thinking and acting.

Ritual has such importance because of the unique human faculty of speech. Without language humans would not be humans but with language a whole new mode-of-being-in-the-world becomes possible. Language as symbol is creative of new understanding, as symbols are related to each other and provide sustained insight. Let us see how this is true by examining the form of ritual called mantra. Then it will be possible to see how mantra preserves and opens up the religious forms of mystery, faith and ethics.

First, let us see what mantra is and what mantra does. ‘In the beginning was the word.’ That is to say, a word is creative: in the Book of Genesis the word is, ‘Let there be light’, the result is, ‘There was light’. Hindus, likewise, have understood mantra as creative power, rather than as human opinion. Professor J. Gonda says, ‘The Vedic mantras exist eternally, representing principles which are co-existent with the very cosmic process.’ The whole universe comes forth from Shabda-Brahman. Adherents of the Mimamsa school conclude that the sounds themselves as used in mantra recitation, if done correctly, produce reality as creatively as the eternal cosmic creation, indeed become a part of this cosmic creation.

If we try to look at this understanding of mantra from a philosophical perspective, what is being claimed here is basically that the universe is meaningful, that any conception of reality is false which maintains that there was a purely naturalistic—i.e., materialistic—Big Bang at the Beginning, not even a Whimper at the End, and in between nothing of any significance. If Idea (sphota) is inherent ‘in the works’, then ideas and values in humans are not epiphenomenal but cumulatively valid, that is to say, creative of the new and the valuable.
Livingness exists within a closely-knit cosmic context of meaning and eternal values. Mantra should be understood from the perspective of this philosophy.

The sphota concept suggests to us that there is, psychologically speaking, something prior to the word as spoken or even as thought. This something is silence. Lama Anagarika Govinda says that the audible arises out of the inaudible, the thought out of that which is beyond thought. Certainly there is a silent inner energy (called Spirit by Christians and Shakti by Hindus) from which words come. John Woolman, a Quaker of the eighteenth century, went to visit American Indians in the woods of Pennsylvania. Quakers often worship in silence and after one meeting an Indian said, ‘I love to feel where words come from.’

It all depends, of course, on who is sitting in the woods. The Vedic seers, also sitting in the woods, many centuries before, were open to the inner unspoken word. By meditation they were prepared, they were listening to the Spirit. When the Spirit spoke, they heard.

So likewise for the modern person. If we are not listening, except to our own inner chattering with ourselves about daily events—in other words, if we are not silent—we will not be open for the spoken word. But if we will it, the mantra can remind us who we are and what we ought to be doing with our minds. Tarthang Tulku, the Tibetan leader, says, ‘Mantra will open and transform closed and negative states.’ If we will use mantra regularly, ‘there will be less dissipation of our energies and we will discover a new sense of “alive-ness” and appreciation of ourselves and others.’

If the above is a fair sketch of what mantra is and does, we may now look at its function in our threefold study of what religion is and does. First, mantra has always had to do with mystery. One who is sensitive to her place in the universe will often feel wonder and awe. Alan Watts advised Christians to use the word God as a mantra: it is, he said, an exclamation of wonder before the mystery of the universe. Augustine once wrote that a Christian ‘should be a perpetual Alleluia from head to toe.’ In Hinduism Chaitanya’s ecstatic use of mantra is well known, and in Europe and America today the Krishna Consciousness organization has made millions of people familiar with the ecstatic cry of ‘Hare Krishna . . .’. Many other examples from all religions could be given to illustrate mantras’ function to express and to produce feelings of awe and wonder.

But the main source of our understanding of this function of
The Role of Mantra in Religion

mantra remains the Vedas. They are full of uplifting thoughts and enlightening suggestions. They spread before our minds both individual symbols and conceptual gestalts that become mantric in their power to form and reform our thoughts and spirits. Generation after generation, religious people have relieved and repeated the wonder and awe which early seers have felt. What a great mantra, for instance, are the words of the Rig Veda IX. cxiii. 7: ‘Light unfalling ever shines.’ In that ‘deathless world’ which we basically inhabit, the very contrast to the often dark and ugly world of our daily lives creates the proper atmosphere for our reawakening to the true and enduring spiritual situation. The dark and ugly world then becomes a somewhat different place as the light unfalling shines. We are reminded of Upakosala: when he returned to his teacher’s house, his face ‘was shining like a Brahma-knower’ (Chhandogya Upanishad IV. xiv. 2). His response to reality was ecstatic.

Beyond such individual symbols, there are the numerous fuller gestalts or patterns in which concepts are meshed with feelings to produce the kind of exaltation that comes from a particular understanding of existence. This understanding, in the case of Rig Veda X.xc, involves the whole of creation as a sacrifice of the Cosmic Person. The idea of multiplicity is expressed by the ‘thousand heads’ and ‘thousand eyes and feet’ of this Purusha; his transcendence is expressed in his exceeding the earth ‘by ten fingers’ breadth’; the idea of his unity is expressed by the fact that all created beings and objects are his sacrificed body: ‘his mouth became the priestly class, . . . the sky came from his head’ and so on.

Here we have a poetic revelation of what it means to be alive: we are alive in a universe of marvellous variation, mysterious power extending from beyond ourselves, harmony of self-giving and receiving. Those who have had the insight to perceive all this and make it known to us have enabled us to add, by mantric meditation, our own wonder and awe to theirs. A mantra, whatever it may be, that expresses for us the gestalt of this philosophy could assist us to remake our attitudes and responses in everyday occasions.

The second mode-of-being-in-the-world that becomes a condition sine qua non for religious people is faith, which we have for this paper defined as trust and confidence. The abhaya mudra, especially used in Mahayana Buddhism, expresses the assurance Never Fear, all is (finally) well. But most of all, mantra has been found to be the best expression of
faith and by many people, at least, the best instrument for inducing and preserving trust and confidence.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this practice, which becomes a kind of paradigm for others, is that of Japanese Buddhism, especially the Pure Land variety. For more than seven centuries millions of followers of thirteenth century Honen and Shinran have uttered the Nembutsu: Namu Amida Butsu, adoration to the Buddha Amitabha. In the far, far past, Amida vowed to save all those who call upon him, the point being that the world is so bad and we are so bad that our only help must come from beyond. Honen taught his followers to use a rosary and to count the number of times they said the Nembutsu each day. The greater the number, the surer their salvation. But that sounds like earning your salvation, Shinran thought. It is rather the faith that motivates the mantra and the mantra that stimulates the faith. Shinran showed the necessity for both when he declared that he would say the Nembutsu even if to say it would bring him to hell (reminding us of Ramanuja’s famous statement about his mantra). If someone said the Nembutsu only once with deep faith that would be infinitely better than a million repetitions that were simply mechanical.

But not for a moment did such a conclusion lead Shinran to abandon or diminish his incessant practice of saying, Namu Amida Butsu. It held him in faith, it kept him from falling from grace. It was also a way to say a continual Thank You to Amida. The mantra became faithful living. He said it without ceasing, while busy with other things, while talking, even while sleeping. It was part of his breathing, of the very beat of his heart. He himself was the Nembutsu. So effectively did he live this way that other people thought, What a great mode-of-being-in-the-world! or an equivalent thirteenth-century expression. His followers grew by leaps and bounds. Still today the mantra is said and said with faith in Amida by the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan.

The third essential aspect of religion is the ethical. As we have seen, it represents the inevitable reflection in behaviour of mastery and faith, and once more the great vehicle of inner motivation and clarification has been the mantra. And again examples can be found everywhere.

But perhaps not many people are aware that Mahatma Gandhi’s use of the mantra is one of the best witnesses to its ethical impact. When he was shot, he cried out, ‘He Ram’, and died. Given as ‘O God’, in the excellent film on the life of Gandhi currently shown to loud approbation all over America, this final expression of his mantra grew
out of a long life of high morals and social service to India. From early childhood he was taught Ramanama. In his later extremely active life he never neglected his mantra, and from time to time he gave good advice, such as: 'One must be completely absorbed in whatever mantra one selects. But one should not mind if other thoughts disturb one during japa. One who goes on will conquer in the end.' "Each repetition has a new meaning and carries you nearer and nearer to God."

But Gandhi felt that a mantra 'should express itself in your whole life', and for this reason mantra was for Gandhi closely tied to moral practice. For instance, his personal conviction about celibacy even though married must have led him to write, 'Our most powerful ally in conquering animal passion is Ramanama or some similar mantra.' Perhaps also we understand Gandhi's fasting better when we read his words from Young India: One who calls on the name of the Lord 'may do without food for days together, but not for a single moment without prayer.' He believed, too, in spiritual healing when sick by this same calling on the name of the Lord.

But he did not mean that japa could be a substitute for effort. Rather it 'intensifies' and 'channels our efforts.' At the same time it gives us 'detachment and ballast' so that we are not thrown off-balance at critical moments. In fact for Gandhi it is in vain to repeat a mantra 'if no corresponding service worthy of Rama is rendered.' If we try to use mantra just for self-realization, he claims that this is impossible without at the same time serving the poor and identifying ourselves with the poorest. Here in concern for others we perhaps reach the highest understanding of ethical duty. Respect for others, proper action on their behalf—especially the most destitute—expresses the need all religions feel to live out their experience of mystery and faith. Gandhi was convinced that whole-hearted use of mantra relates one to others in these ways.

Perhaps Gandhi was naive in his simple belief that if millions of people would use a mantra 'in real earnest', all social evils would disappear and 'the Kingdom of God could come on earth.' Nevertheless he was a unique witness to the possibility of combining high ethical practice with a rich inner spiritual life. And this combination was actualized by his understanding of mantra and his use of mantra all his life.

The conclusion of this study is that mantra has an indispensable role to play in discovering (or uncovering) and expanding some of the vital sources of religion—mystery (recorded as wonder and awe), faith (recorded as trust and confidence), and ethics (recorded as respect and
duty). The history of mantra’s employment in all religions, only suggested here, is an important part of the spiritual history of humanity. There is every reason to expect its continuance as such.

Swamiji’s Small Treasures

In New York, Swami Vivekananda taught classes on Karma Yoga, illustrating them with many stories which he had heard when he was a boy. They had made such a tremendous impression on his mind that he carried them as small treasures through his life and shared them with his students half-way around the earth. He told them that:

After the battle of Kurukshetra the five Pandava brothers performed a great ritual sacrifice and made very large gifts to the poor. All people expressed amazement at the greatness and richness of the sacrifice, and said that such a sacrifice the world had never seen before. But, after the ceremony, there came a little mongoose; half his body was golden and the other half was brown; and he began to roll on the floor of the sacrificial hall. He said to those around, ‘You are all liars; this is no sacrifice.’ ‘What!’ they exclaimed, ‘you say this is no sacrifice; do you not know how money and jewels were poured out to the poor and everyone became rich and happy? This was the most wonderful sacrifice any man ever performed.’ But the mongoose said, ‘There was once a little village, and in it there dwelt a poor Brahmin, with his wife, his son and his son’s wife. They were very poor and lived on small gifts made to them for preaching and teaching. There came in that land a three years’ famine, and the poor Brahmin suffered more than ever. At last when the family had starved for days, the father brought home one morning a little barley flour, which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and he divided it into four parts, one for each member of the family. They prepared it for their meal, and just as they were about to eat there was a knock at the door. The father opened it, and there stood a poor man. ‘I need food’ he said. ‘Ah, the Lord has sent us a guest,’ said the father. Now in India a guest is a sacred person; he is as a god for the time being, and must be treated as such. So, the mongoose continued, ‘the poor Brahmin said, ‘Come in, sir; you are welcome.’ He set before the guest his own portion of the food, which the guest quickly ate and said, ‘Oh,
sir, you have killed me; I have been starving for ten days, and this little bit has but increased my hunger.' Then the wife said to her husband, 'Give him my share,' but the husband said, 'Not so.' The wife, however, insisted, saying, 'Here is a poor man, and it is our duty as householders to see that he is fed, and it is my duty as a wife to give him my portion, seeing that you have no more to offer him.' Then she gave her share to the guest, which he ate, and said he was still burning with hunger. So the son said, 'Take my portion also; it is the duty of a son to help his father to fulfil his obligations.' The guest ate that, but remained still unsatisfied; so the son's wife gave him her portion also. That was sufficient, and the guest departed, blessing them. That night, the mongoose continued, those four people died of starvation. A few granules of that flour had fallen on the floor, and when I rolled my body on them half of it became golden, as you see. Since then I have been travelling over the world, hoping to find another sacrifice like that, but nowhere have I found one; nowhere else has the other half of my body been turned into gold. That is why I say this is no sacrifice.'

The First Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita: Key to its Universal Appeal

USHA RAGHUPATHY

The Bhagavad Gita is the shortest and yet the most practical, the most universally applicable of the Hindu Shastras. It has been not only the guide of philosophers through the ages but also the solace of ordinary people right up to the present day. A phrase, a thought, a statement from the Bhagavad Gita has often come to the rescue of those, great and small, faced by crises in their day-to-day lives. At different times and in different circumstances, people have found in the Bhagavad Gita, a solution specific to their problem and have achieved thereby equanimity and peace of mind. As Mahatma Gandhi says, 'I find solace in the Bhagavad Gita. When disappointment stares me in the face, I go back to it again and again.' Others, too, have said something very similar;

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and a number of people in recent times, Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi to name the more famous, who have been directly inspired by it have written virtually new commentaries on it. It has inspired not only Hindus and Indians, but also people of other faiths and other countries. Books have been written which introduce the Bhagavad Gita to the modern business executive and the housewife. Such attempts should not be looked upon with scorn, for it has been said that the Gita has something to offer even the sinner if he will but follow its teachings.

Why is this so? What is the source of its universal appeal? How has one short treatise helped so many people with different problems? Why are there so many interpretations of it, each from the personal viewpoint of the commentator? The answer lies in the very first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita.

It is here, in this introductory chapter, which most people skip in their hurry to get to the later chapters, that the Bhagavad Gita is revealed as not merely a scripture but a testament, an intensely vital document showing the relationship of man to God. The Bhagavad Gita, the 'Song of God', is addressed to the layman, to a person bogged down by the indecisions and crises of worldly life. It needs no scholarship; it demands no basic requirements; it lays down no criteria; it has no dogma, no rituals.

The Gita is a human story: the story of a prince who loses heart in the field of battle and is overcome by remorse and despondency, and of his charioteer who helps him regain confidence. The prince, Arjuna, is no ordinary mortal; the finest archer of his time, he is a warrior unequalled in his knowledge of the arts of warfare, the best of men. He had nothing to fear from without, for he was invincible. With the confidence born of his strength, he tells his charioteer Krishna, (who later reveals himself as God-incarnate), to position his chariot between the two armies so that, as he says, 'I may see those who are assembled with the intention of fighting, and who are preparing for combat desirous to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra.'

Yet in the very next instant, having seen amongst his opponents, his closest kinsmen and comrades, his most respected elders, he says: 'My limbs fail, my mouth is dry, my body shivers, my hair stands on end, the bow, Gandiva, slips from my hand, and my skin burns; I am not able to stand, and I feel dizzy. He crumbles from within and is unable to perform the task before him, for his emotions have taken control of his senses. Dizziness, sweating, shivering and fainting are the typical symptoms of emotional shock as any standard textbook of
The First Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita

medicine would describe it: an enfeebled physical condition preparatory to complete nervous breakdown.

Arjuna reveals himself as being entirely human. Having displayed all the symptoms of shock, he proceeds to give all sorts of excuses for not doing the job at hand. He says:

‘I do not desire victory, nor sovereignty, nor pleasure; of what use is life itself?’

Did not Arjuna and the other sons of Pandu ask for a share of the ancestral kingdom earlier? Were they not prone earlier to worldly pleasure like playing dice? Then he says:

‘I would not like to kill them even if they should kill us. Sin alone will overtake us if we kill these aggressors.’

For a warrior, killing in battle has never been thought of as sinful. Was Arjuna not a warrior of the highest order, a veteran fighter who had gained fame and not incurred sin by fighting in numerous battles? But now, he wishes to give up the battle before it has begun. He feels hopelessly lost, confused, distraught, more at war with the internal than the external enemy. So Sanjaya, the narrator, says:

‘Speaking thus, Arjuna sat down in the chariot in the midst of battle, grief-stricken, and cast away his bow and arrows.’

Arjuna, the mighty warrior completely breaks down. Is it surprising, then, that other lesser mortals also do so? Here ends the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita: at a point when Arjuna feels that all is lost and he does not know to whom to turn. Throughout this first chapter, Sri Krishna does not utter a single word; he listens and observes, much as any therapist would. From the second chapter, when all seems lost, Sri Krishna takes over, not only literally but figuratively: God steps in when human faculties, human reason, fail.

Many readers and most commentators do not give due emphasis to the first chapter. In this chapter, however, seems to be the key to an understanding of the reason for the eternal and universal appeal of the Bhagavad Gita. While the far more well-known and much-quoted eleventh chapter reveals Sri Krishna as God, the almost unknown first chapter reveals Arjuna as a man.

It is this contrast—the first chapter compared with the eleventh chapter—the shadow of man, the finite, transient creature in the light of God the infinite, the Eternal Being, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, that throws into sharp relief man’s need for and relationship with God. What the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita tells every person is that if Arjuna, the best among men, could crack, then everyone has a
breaking point: the mental and physical limit of tolerance of one's psychic and physical shell. Practice and renunciation can raise the level of our tolerance to stress; training can make bodies and minds almost superhuman; most persons in most situations can pull themselves together, as it were, by sheer force of will or habit. But at times even the greatest mortal reaches a critical point at which he is unable to cope. He needs a friend to support him, a parent or guru to advise him step by step to the right path. When such human support and guidance does not seem to be forthcoming, when man feels alone in a hostile, chaotic world, then he turns to (or rather finds right by his side, as it were) God, the universal friend, the ultimate philosopher, the eternal guide. Physical and mental 'breakdown' are often symptoms of the 'veil of Maya' separating man being violently torn asunder from God. As this thin but exceedingly tough 'veil' is rent, man is in a position to communicate with God and the first step on the path of Yoga has been taken. As communication improves and increases, man finds that God in human form gradually takes on the aspect of God as the immutable Principle (Tat-Sat) behind and beyond creation and destruction, a Principle whose benign manifestation is the cosmos or order and whose malign manifestation is chaos or disorder. Finally, when all barriers to communication vanish, full realization dawns: man and God, earlier perceived as two separate categories or objects, become inseparable aspects of the same truth; they merge in one whole (Tat tum asi).

At his 'breaking point', Arjuna discovers that Sri Krishna, God himself in human form, has been with him all along. Many people, not as fortunate as the great prince, suddenly discover at their breaking point, some phrase in the Bhagavad Gita that they had earlier neglected but which has been with them all along. A phrase comes to their mind and reactivates something deep within them; it is as though the human instrument has been ripped out of some constraining wrapper (of Maya) and plugged back into an infinite, self-renewing reservoir of the purest energy. The finite, decaying matter-energy bundle of their bodies is suddenly brought back to life by a surge of power from some infinite source that they never realized they could tap.

Identifying themselves with Arjuna the man, they hear Sri Krishna, the God, talking to them through the fiction of Arjuna. At such times, the Bhagavad Gita steps off the shelf of scriptural tomes and becomes a living force, and to use the metaphor of the Gita itself, the perennial milk (of immortality of knowledge) begins to flow from the udder of the eternal cow of knowledge.
Indian Culture and Modern India

PREM BALLAV SEN

Indian Culture is marked by two prominent characteristics, its antiquity and continuity. Its history is as old as that of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and Sumer. Though one of the oldest, it has an astonishing vitality which is the cause of its unique continuity. The old cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Sumer have become extinct. Very little of old Chinese culture is to be found in Communist China. But India still keeps alive the cultural ideals of the Vedas and the Upanishads and even the cultural traditions of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. In social customs, religious rites and intellectual outlook India still retains a living link with the ages of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

This cultural heritage of India has survived many foreign invasions. In the history of India, ruling foreign powers have tried, for several thousand years, to wipe out the national culture and to enforce foreign ideals and ways of life all over the land. A section of Indians joined hands with the foreigners to extend foreign occupation and to make India give up its own character. Yet, India succeeded repeatedly in overthrowing the foreign rulers and in maintaining its own aims and forms of life largely unimpaired.

In modern India too, we find a conflict between engulfing foreign influences which are trying to denationalize India and the irrepressible continuity of the Indian tradition in the world of religion, society and culture. The modern period of Indian history began with the British rule. Christianity together with the western secular pattern of life and intellectual outlook tried to convert India into a replica of Europe. During the Moslem rule similar attempts were made to turn India into an Islamic land. But it has not been possible to make modern India a second edition of Europe as it was impossible to turn medieval India into an exclusively Islamic state. This basic trend of development in the history of India must be remembered in the study of India’s cultural heritage. India had been neither anti-Christian nor anti-Islamic, but to govern its national life, India’s own philosophy and spiritual realization was never replaced by any foreign ideology.

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A very earnest attempt to mould India thoroughly on the model of Europe was made with the beginning of English education in India. Christian missionaries wanted to introduce the teaching of the English language so that Indians would read the Bible and thereby be converted to Christianity. The poverty of Indians became the chief source of spreading Christianity in India. The lure of gold and the hurling of abuses were the two principal weapons that were utilized for conversion to Christianity. The Derozians, who were known as 'Young Bengal' thought of effacing everything that originated in ancient India by the hammering blow of European rationalism and scepticism. Though Derozio himself had respect for the glories of India's past ages, his disciples equated everything Indian with nothing but barbarity. Ram Mohan Roy initiated a move which aimed at the acceptance of absolute supremacy of European civilization and culture mingled with a superficial respect for the Upanishads and the Vedanta. He wanted to build a new India in which the planting of European colonies was necessary to educate Indians to evolve a higher life, and where the teaching of Vedanta to young Indian students was considered totally useless. Thus through the zealous efforts of the Christian missionaries, the 'Young Bengal' and the Brahmo Samaj, Europeanization began in India which taught the Indians to turn their faces away from the cultural heritage of India that had created a unique record of achievements in the past several centuries.

As a result, a regeneration of India was attempted, discarding the vitalizing influence of Indian culture. It was like staging Hamlet without the role of the Prince of Denmark. Under the circumstances it was not astonishing that Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen visited England but remained totally silent about the part that India had to play in the field of world culture. They had forgotten that India was the place of pilgrimage of innumerable scholars and holy men like Fa-Hsien, Hseuan Tsang and I Tsang. The history of Nalanda and Vikramashila did not get any recognition from them. All that they wanted was that young Indians go to the West with a beggar's bowl and prosper with the aims that would be given out of compassion by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. To them it was impossible to imagine India in the role of a teacher to the different nations of the world. Perhaps the cultural expedition of India to China, Japan, Indonesia, Burma, Ceylon and Tibet was a myth to them. That is why Ram Mohan Roy condemned India's intellectual life in the most contemptuous terms, Pandit Vidyasagar unhesitatingly declared the Vedanta
and Samkhya philosophies to be ‘false’ and Keshab Chandra Sen looked upon Christianity as the saving power that would deliver India.

But the historical role of India, ennobling human life since Vedic times down to the days of the Buddha, could not be eliminated once for all. Two thousand five hundred years after the coming of the Buddha, the wheel of history was turned to raise India again to the position of the teacher of mankind. In the world forum of the Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893, Indian thought and culture was recognized for the first time in the history of modern India. For the second time after the Buddha, Swami Vivekananda made India the land of pilgrimage for people who searched for wisdom and enlightenment.

Recognition of Indian Culture

The value of Indian culture was recognized earlier by Bankim Chandra, who in his novel, Sittaram, deplored the fact that we cast off Kalidasa to read Swinburne, we chose the works of John Stuart Mill in place of the Bhagavad Gita, and we ignore Orissa’s sculpture and architecture to admire the clay models of any European art school. The task of reasserting faith in Indian culture that began with Bankim Chandra culminated with Swami Vivekananda. While Bankim’s influence was confined to the readers of Bengali literature, Vivekananda opened the eyes of the people of India and people of different nations who learnt to appreciate the worth and richness of Indian culture. The influence of Vivekananda’s lofty teaching on America and England installed India again on the seat of a world-teacher. At that time, Indians were going to the universities of the West to learn; but Vivekananda was the first Indian who went to Harvard University in America as a great Master of the Vedanta Philosophy. His lecture there created such a tremendous impression that he was requested to become a professor of philosophy in that university. Thus a new chapter in the history of India was opened when a subjugated country like India was looked upon as a liberator of the world from the bondage of ignorance and sectarian narrowness.

Since the days of Bankim and Vivekananda, the cry for English education that rose with Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen gave way to the demand for a national education. A new India emerged to contribute its immortal creations in the world of thought, literature, art and social reconstruction. That age of Indian Renaissance enkindled
national confidence and a keen desire to make India politically free. Bankim Chandra gave the mantra of liberation—'Bande Mataram', 'I Salute the Mother' and Vivekananda dedicated Indian youth at the feet of the Motherland. The fight for freedom continued through hard struggle and suffering. A re-awakened India at last won its freedom.

Conflict of a New National Identity

It is strange, however, to find that Independent India is again being allured to follow the path of cultural slavery. The so-called intelligentsia, who swear by the creed of Leftism, concentrate all their energy on making India a satellite of either Russia or China. The Anglicized Indians lament bitterly that India is neither England nor America. The great role that India played throughout its history of thousands of years is insignificant and unacceptable in the eyes of both the Leftist and the Anglicized Indians. Consequently, echoing the clamorous slogans of the Communist camp or the Anglo-American bloc is the sole aim followed by the student community of India.

This has brought in an age of decadence in cultural and intellectual life. There is no originality in the country's contributions in the field of literature and thought, the dramas are mere translations of works of foreign dramatists, novels and poems are only imitations of foreign ones. Indian life and society that was portrayed in a masterly manner by Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath, with all its depth and grandeur, made no appeal to modern writers except a few men of genius like Bibhutibhushan, Banaphul and Tarashankar. Many modern Indian writers have contempt for the image of India as reflected in its history. The history of modern Bengal is referred to here only because it was in Bengal that the movement for the Europeanization of India first began and it is in Bengal today that the same movement is being harnessed for a revival.

This is the irony of the Indian national life, that Indians today have developed a hatred for India's cultural heritage and they think of reshaping India into simply an imitator of either a Communist country or a modern Western state. India's own identity in thought and culture is considered a fetter that must be destroyed to pave the way for progressiveness. The refusal to recognize the contributions of India in the field of thought and culture has developed an outlook that lacks depth of vision.

India was once the source of inspiration to China, Japan, Burma,
Ceylon and other countries of South-East Asia, whose cultural attainments reached high eminence. Now she is no longer the land of creative genius. But if the youth of India today were educated in the man-making and universal teachings of Vedanta as taught by Swami Vivekananda, modern India would rise to even greater heights than in the past.

Brahma-Sutra-Bhasya of Sri Shankaracharya

M.R. YARDI

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Brahman as Consciousness

In the last article it was established after examining the relevant sutras in the Brahma-Sutra that Brahman is a pre-existing real entity. The Samkhyas and other thinkers hold that a pre-existing entity should be known through other means of knowledge apart from scripture. They also hold that in all Vedic passages dealing with creation, the cause is sought to be known through the effect with the aid of inference. Proceeding on the basis of observation that the effect springs from a subtler cause, the Samkhyas posit, in order to avoid infinite regress, a primal cause of the universe which they call pradhana, primordial matter. They further hold that there are also sentient selves, the purushas, for whose benefit the pradhana evolves. The relationship between the sentient selves and the insentient pradhana is that between the enjoyer, bhoktri and the enjoyed, bhogya. The Vaisheshikas, on the other hand, infer that the world is constituted of minute particles of matter called atoms, anu, with God as its operative cause. Thus the Samkhyas and the Vaisheshikas reason that a sentient entity such as Brahman cannot be the cause of the insentient world.

Sri Badarayana states this objection in sutra II.i.4 (न बिलक्षणः
त्वादस्य तथात्वं न शण्डात्), which means, 'No, (Brahman cannot be the cause of the universe) because of its dissimilarity (with the universe); that

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it is so follows from the Vedas.' The objector argues as follows: If we examine the question of Brahman's causality of the world by appeal to reason, we find that there is a difference in nature between Brahman and the world. Brahman is conscious and pure, whereas the world is unconscious and impure. The cause and its effect cannot be different in nature. In order to circumvent this difficulty, it may be said that the world, too, may be sentient but that its apparent insentience may be due to some peculiarity of its evolution. Just as the sentience of persons, which is a patent fact, is not apparent in the states of sleep or swoon, so also the sentience in wood, clods of earth and other things may remain latent for some reason. There are also passages in the Upani-shads such as, the earth spoke, the fire thought and the pranas quarrelled. The aphorist disposes of this last argument in Sutra II.i.5 (श्रमिनानिध्वपे- श्वेषस्तु विशेषात्मनुरतिम्याम्). He says, 'These (passages) refer to the presiding deities on account of the specific mention of their distinctive natures and the inherence (of the deities in the organs and pranas). The distinction between the sentient and the insentient is well-known in the world and is supported by the Taittiriya Upanishad (II.6), 'It became the sentient and the insentient.'

The Sutrakara rejects this opponent's view in Sutra II. i.6 (ज्वलयते तु), saying, 'But it is seen.' We see that from man who is a conscious being arises hair, nails and teeth which are unconscious things. The sentient scorpion is said to spring from cowdung and the insentient threads from the sentient spider. A close examination of these instances shows that the relation of cause and effect subsists only between insentient thing, as the human body produces the hair, nails and teeth and cowdung produces the insentient body of the scorpion. Sri Shankara therefore argues that Brahman cannot be known by reasoning, as it is devoid of all grounds of inference. It is stated in the Katha Upanishad (I.ii.9) 'Not by reasoning is this notion (of Brahman) to be attained. Only when imparted by another (i.e. knower of Brahman) it conduces to knowledge.' There is also the Vedic text (Rig Veda I.xxx.6), which says, 'Whoever had direct knowledge of that thing from which this diverse creation sprang, and whoever spoke of this in the world? The gods were later than this creation. So how can anyone know that from which creation originated?' These two passages show that the origin of the world is inscrutable even to the divine beings. We must therefore seek the knowledge of Brahman in the scriptures alone.

The Upanishads state with one voice that before creation there was but Existence (Brahman) one only without a second. In all Vedic passages
dealing with creation, seeing or thinking is said to have preceded creation. It is stated in the \textit{Chhandogya Upanishad} (VI.ii.3), ‘It visualized (thought), may I be many, may I grow forth’, there can be no thought or knowledge without a witnessing, i.e., a conscious principle. There are also scriptural passages such as the one in the \textit{Mundaka Upanishad} (I.i.9) which state that an all-knowing God is the cause of the universe. The Samkhya argument that thought is a quality of \textit{pradhana}, being the quality of \textit{sattva}, does not hold water, as before creation the three gunas constituting the \textit{pradhana} are in a state of equipoise and thought or knowledge is not possible in that state. The \textit{sutrakara}, there, declares in \textit{sutra} I.i.5 (इसतेनाश्चत्वम) ‘No, (Samkhya’s \textit{pradhana} cannot be the cause of the universe); because of the mention of ‘visualizing’ it is not founded on the scripture.’ He has devoted a whole chapter to disproving the Samkhya doctrine by demonstrating that some scriptural passages which seem to support this doctrine can be interpreted differently. He concludes the first chapter with \textit{sutra} I.iv.28 (एतन सत्व मा व्यास्याता व्यास्याता;) in which he says that ‘all (doctrines which speak of an insentient entity as the cause of the universe) are thus explained away.’ Such doctrines are not founded on scriptural authority and so do not need separate comment.

Consciousness as the cause of the universe is challenged again on two other grounds, namely (1) the lack of motive and (2) the presence of evil in the world. Sri Badarayana states the first ground in \textit{sutra} II.i.32 (न प्रक्षेपजनवत्वात), meaning, ‘No, (Brahman cannot be the cause of the world) because of the need of some motive (for creation).’ It is seen that no intelligent creature acts in this world without a motive. Every activity requiring even minimal effort is undertaken with some purpose, either for some benefit to oneself or to others. Sometimes a sentient being is seen to act without a motive in a fit of madness or for want of judgment. Both these assumptions cannot apply to the Supreme Being, because the Vedas declare Him to be self-sufficient and omniscient. The \textit{sutrakara} gives a reply in \textit{sutra} II.i.33 (लोकवत्तू सोलाक्षेप्रम), stating that ‘as in ordinary life, creation is merely his \textit{lila}, sport.’ We see in this world men of position indulging in sport, even though they have no unfulfilled desires. It is also observed that breathing goes on spontaneously without reference to any extraneous purpose. So also creation proceeds from the nature of the Supreme Being without reference to any extraneous purpose. There are clear Vedic passages about His creation and omniscience. We therefore cannot call into question God’s nature or His inscrutable ways. Sri Shankara adds that these
Vedic passages about creation do not mean real creation. They are only valid within the range of activities concerned with name and form conceived in ignorance and are only meant for expounding the identity of the Self with Brahman. But this reasoning of Sri Shankara does not seem to follow from the wording of the sutra.

The second ground of objection is that this world is full of misery and suffering, and so cannot be the handiwork of an intelligent God. Does this mean that God also acts like men with malice and hatred? The existence of evil makes the Divine culpable of extreme cruelty and want of compassion. The sutrakara states this view and provides an answer in sutra II.i.34 (चेष्टान्नेतृत्वं न सापेक्षत्वाभ्युथ तथा हि दशंयति). The meaning of this sutra is as follows: ‘No, inequality and cruelty (do not attach to God), these being dependent on other factors; so the scripture shows,’ God would have been open to these charges if he were to create this world all by himself without regard to other considerations. The inequalities that we see in the world are due to the merit and demerit of human beings. No fault attaches to God as he dispenses happiness and misery according to the deserts of creatures. The bhashyakara gives the analogy of rain, which is the common cause for the growth of all kinds of crops, their differences being due to the potentialities of the seeds. Similarly God is the common cause of creation, the inequalities being due to the merit and demerit of the individual persons. The scripture also demonstrates this. In the Kaushitaki Upanishad III.8 it is stated, ‘It makes him perform good deeds, whom it would raise high above these worlds, and it makes him do bad deeds, whom it would cast below these world.’ The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad IV.iv.5 also states, ‘One becomes virtuous by good actions and vicious by bad actions.’ The Smriti also shows that God dispenses or withholds favour, depending upon the merits of each case. Thus Lord Krishna says in the Gita (IV.11), ‘In whatever way men worship me, in the same way I grant their desires.’

The sutrakara then considers a possible objection, which Sri Shankara explains as follows: Since there was only Existence in the beginning, there was non-differentiation before the first creation and so there could have been no karma which could give rise to inequalities. God may well work through the law of karma after the creation of diversity. If it be said that after creation the diversity of bodies gives rise to karma and that the latter in its turn gives rise to diverse bodies, one would be arguing in a circle. To this the sutrakara’s reply is contained in sutra II.i.35 (न कस्मविभागादिदिः चेन्नागवित्वात्), which means,
‘If it be said that there was no karma because of non-differentiation (before the first creation), we say that (samsara) has no beginning.’ If we grant that the transmigratory state is beginningless, then it is possible for the fruits of works and the diversity of creation to act as cause and effect of each other on the analogy of the seed and the sprout.

The aphorist then gives a plausible reason and scriptural corroboration for this above view in *sutra* II.i.36 (उपपत्तेः वाच्युल्लभते च). The meaning of this *sutra* is, ‘(The beginninglessness of samsara) stands to reason and is met with in the scripture’. Sri Shankara explains this *sutra* as follows: If we accept that the transmigratory state is without a beginning, then the inequalities due to difference in happiness and misery would find a plausible explanation. That God cannot be the cause of these inequalities has already been established. Ignorance (avidya) also cannot be the cause, as it is common to all embodied selves. If the world were to have had a beginning and had come into existence without a cause, then anything may come into being without any cause. Then men may suffer for what they have not done and not enjoy the fruits of what they have done. All this is avoided if creation is held to be beginningless. Then work and inequality would operate as cause and effect of each other on the analogy of the seed and the sprout. That creation is without beginning and occurs in cycles is declared by the scripture also. Thus a passage in the *Rig Veda* (X.cx.3) says, ‘The Ordainer created the sun and the moon as in the previous cycles.’ It is stated in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* VI.iii.2 ‘That Being thought to Itself, let me enter these with this living Self’. Here the term ‘living Self’ refers to an existing entity, indicating that the transmigratory state had no beginning. The *Gita* (XV.3) also declares as regards the tree of life that ‘its form is not here perceived as such, neither its end, nor its origin nor its continuance.’

The aphorist, therefore, concludes that since conscious Brahman differs from all other causes in omniscience and omnipotence, and produces the worlds in sport and regulates the diversity of creation according to the karma of the embodied Self, It alone is the cause of this universe.
Fearlessness

B. Ch. Chhabra

FEARLESSNESS is the foremost of all the noble qualities of man. Sri Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, enumerates the divine virtues or divine wealth, daivi sampad and the demonic evils, asuri sampad. Of the twenty-six divine virtues he puts abhaya, fearlessness, first. The remaining twenty-five are: purity of heart, stability in the pursuit of knowledge and meditation, charity, self-control, sacrifice, study, austerity, straightforwardness, non-violence, honesty, absence of anger, liberality, peace, not spreading false rumours, compassion, absence of greediness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, brilliance, forgiveness, tolerance, cleanliness, non-enmity and humility.*

It may be observed that some of these are repetitions. Yet Sri Krishna has mentioned them as commonly-known virtues. It may be asked why fearlessness has been given the first and foremost place. It is because it is the result of all the virtues, especially of satya, honesty, truthfulness or sincerity. Think of the common saying, ‘There is nothing to fear in truth.’ (सत्यमेव जयते). In other words, one who speaks the truth and is sincere has nothing to fear. One may ask how many people there are in this wide world who are really truthful and sincere. The answer is, very few indeed.

India has accepted the motto, ‘Truth alone conquers’ (सत्यमेव जयते). This is the motto displayed on the Indian national flag, on letter-heads, sign-boards and so on. In spite of all this, what happens in practice: in business, in service, in departments of the government and even in personal relations with near and dear ones? What happens when a few friends get together what do they talk about most of the time? They engage in fault-finding, gossiping, cheating, underhand dealings with white and black money, and the like. People who are really honest and intend to

* \( \text{सत्यसंपूर्ण}
\text{अन्योग्यायवस्थिति:}
\)
\( \text{दानं} \)
\( \text{दमस्व} \)
\( \text{यज्ञश्च} \)
\( \text{स्वाध्यायस्तस्तप} \)
\( \text{आवर्तम्} \)
\( \text{श्रीहिसा} \)
\( \text{सत्यकौष्ठ्यम्} \)
\( \text{शान्तिरपूर्णम्} \)
\( \text{द्या} \)
\( \text{भूतेयन्तराध्यं मादवं} \)
\( \text{दीर्घकालसम्} \)
\( \text{हेतु:} \)
\( \text{क्षमा} \)
\( \text{वृत्ति:} \)
\( \text{शौचमस्यहो} \)
\( \text{नातिमानित्वा} \)

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remain truthful under any circumstance whatsoever are rare in this world. They may be few; yet they do exist. Iron is common and gold is rare indeed; but there is gold too.

Saints and sages in their discourses usually advance their listeners to be honest and straightforward and, to encourage them cite examples of great Indian people: Rama and Harishchandra, Savitri and Satyabhama who were ready to suffer rather than deviate from the righteous path. When people hear such lectures they decide to remain truthful thereafter, yet they fail. What is the force that misleads them and compels them to do wrong? This was the question put by Arjuna to Sri Krishna as we read in the Gita, ‘What is the force that compels man to do wrong even when he does not wish to do that, O Krishna?’ The answer given by Sri Krishna is, ‘It is desire and anger.’ When desire is not fulfilled, it turns into anger which impels one to do wrong. It is at the root of all evil: telling lies, cheating, getting angry, abusing others and so on. Even good and saintly people fall victim to such behaviour. The advice given by Sri Krishna is to go on trying, again and again, to overcome lust, desire, greed and anger. These vices are our enemies. Let us overcome them. It is easy to preach such things, but it is difficult to practise them. We listen to religious discourses, go to temples, say prayers; some of us take sannyasa and become sadhus. The aim is the same; to rise above vices, to remain calm under all provocation. Those who succeed become fearless. To remain fearless forever one has to go on overcoming vices at every step, gaining victory over desires and fury. All the other virtues constituting ‘divine wealth’ expounded by the Lord come of their own accord. One good thing follows another good thing. In the same way, one bad thing follows another bad thing. Let people pursue the path of acquiring good qualities and the result will be the acquisition of fearlessness.

About fearlessness, Swami Vivekananda said, ‘If there is one word that you find coming out like a bomb from the Upanishads, bursting like a bomb-shell upon masses of ignorance, it is the word, fearlessness. And the only religion that ought to be taught, is the religion of fearlessness.’

* अश के न परियोग्य घर चर्च पूरा:।
बानदुव्यवधि वायव्य वलातिवुलिन:।
III.36.

**काम एव काव: एव रेणुन्न: समुद्ध:।
III 36a.

+समतु तमप्राप्यनुबधाति विप्र विपुि।
SRI RAMAKRISHNA was immensely pleased when his first disciples, Swami Vivekananda and Swami Saradananda became fast friends. Vivekananda was the fiery flame of inspiration, while Saradananda was the cool and calm plodder who nurtured the Ramakrishna movement for twenty-eight years and set it moving towards its present famous adulthood. Today, who has not heard of the Ramakrishna Mission, its flood and famine relief work, its holy monks giving religious discourses? But few know about its founder-organizer Swami Saradananda. It is true that Swami Vivekananda was the leader chosen by Sri Ramakrishna, but Swami Saradananda was Swami Vivekananda’s chief lieutenant who crystallized his ideals and gave them concrete form.

For two and a half years, (1896-98), Swami Saradananda headed the Vedanta Society in New York. In the meantime, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission had been formally inaugurated and in 1899 Swami Vivekananda asked Swami Saradananda to return to India to be the General Secretary of both organizations. He accepted Swamiji’s ideal of worshipping God by serving mankind and later refused to give up his appointed task even for the Presidentship of the Mission. Swami Saradananda set up branches of the Mission all over India to help the poor, and, with his western experience, he was able to train monks to serve the Mission by preaching Vedanta abroad. In 1926, a year before his death, he collected the monks of a hundred Math and Mission Centres from India to California in a convention to instil into them the zeal, fervour and unity of purpose of the first promoters of the movement.

Swami Saradananda was a man of great frankness and genial behaviour. These qualities helped him to save the Mission from extinction, a fate which was the lot of other religious, social and political movements in Bengal at that time. He had to persuade police officers, who
came to investigate into the affairs of the Mission, that the reformed revolutionaries-turned-religious who joined the Order were no longer rebels against the government. Nevertheless there was a suspicion that Swami Vivekananda’s writings were inflaming the youth to overthrow the British Government in India and Swami Saradananda was called to the Governor’s residence to explain the character of the Mission. The Governor, Lord Ronaldshay, as a result of his talk with Saradananda, became convinced that the Mission had high religious principles and was not interested in politics and he publicly withdrew his charges. The enemy became the admirer and later visited the Mission to observe its daily routine. The revolutionaries also whom Swami Saradananda had courageously accepted never betrayed the trust put in them and became valued members of the Mission. The Mission was concerned with the inner spiritual revolution and not external political revolution.

It was the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna himself, who trained his disciples to be methodical in even small matters like keeping such daily items as a penknife or towel in their proper places and reminding them not to forget their shoes or umbrella when departing. This external precision was a reflection of inner spiritual recollectedness and it enabled the General Secretary to attend to all his other tasks successfully. Once when Saradananda was still a boy, Sri Ramakrishna sat in his lap. He was not merely testing his capacity to bear a heavy burden but was blessing him for his numerous many-faceted future activities. Swami Saradananda later became the chief personal guardian of the Holy Mother besides being an editor, writer, spokesman and spiritual mentor of the Order. In addition, he could be a fine cook, a loving nurse and a good singer. Swami Saradananda with his variegated intellect, came up to Sri Ramakrishna’s expectations. The Great Master did not believe that religious leaders should be dull and dry.

Devotee of the Divine Mother

Swami Saradananda had always dreamt of obtaining a residence for the Holy Mother in Calcutta, where she could administer to her widening circle of devotees. The Swamis of the Order respected her not merely as the wife of their Guru, she was a Guru herself and they all looked upon her as the living mother-goddess, Durga. Swami Saradananda daily made full prostrations before her in spite of his portly bulk. Like a glorified gatekeeper, and sitting in his office below, he screened her visitors and regulated them so that she would not be overstrained.
He arranged for an independent allowance for her from Mrs. Sarah Bull, an American devotee, so that the Holy Mother could happily look after her large entourage. Even after her death, the Swami remained in the Udodhan Office below her room to receive her disciples and attend to their needs, large or small, so they continued to feel mothered. Sri Sarada Devi called him her Vasuki, the mythical cobra with a thousand heads.

Swami Saradananda had to do the work of a businessman when the rent of the printing office was increased. He had taken a personal loan to construct a building which, upstairs, housed the Holy Mother, and downstairs, the publishing office of the Order’s Bengali magazine, Udodhan. To pay off the loan he wrote his monumental biography of the Great Master, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga, and thus preserved the spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna for posterity.

As a Tantric sadhaka, Swami Saradananda regarded all women as special incarnations of Divine Shakti, the Mother of creation. He had personally realized that the goal of God-realization was the same for both the Vedanta and the Tantra, only their methods were different. Tantriks do not deny the unreal but look for God, the Mother, as the formless energy in all things. The Vedas say that even after the creation of this infinite visible world the invisible infinity (Brahman) remains infinite.

The book under review contains advice on spiritual disciplines for budding aspirants. From the chapter, ‘Samadhi and Mahasamadhi’ one gets an idea of the Swami’s own communion with the Mother Goddess. He also wrote in Bengali a book on worship of the Divine Mother in India, Bharate Shakti Puja.

Vignettes

Swami Saradananda’s daily breakfast consisted of toast with cheddar cheese and orange marmalade. In America he wore western clothes and in greeting people, shook hands with them. In Europe, he visited places of interest and occasionally went to the theatre. His lucid lectures to the scholars of Harvard University reveal that he was never dogmatic while expounding the Vedanta. He had learned from his Great Master that one should adapt oneself to time, place and circumstances.

Music can sometimes touch the soul more directly than any heart to heart talk. Swami Saradananda learnt his style of singing and chanting from Swami Vivekananda, who was a gifted musician and Saradananda
in turn, passed it on to the other Swamis. Swami Saradananda used to sing to the Holy Mother and recite Sanskrit verses to her in his resonant voice.

Now we can conjure up a mental picture of a most imposing unflappable, pipe-smoking Swami. He had cultivated his body with exercise for he believed that for the rigours of meditation a strong body was essential. His tremendous inner and outer strength was very useful when he was travelling to Srinagar to nurse Swami Vivekananda when he was sick. On the journey one wheel of the carriage came off. As the carriage rolled down the mountainside he grasped a passing tree and swung himself safely to the ground. Another time he meditated all night, sitting on a rock in a forest, without fear of a lurking tiger. Swami Vivekananda jokingly said that Sarat had the blood of a fish which could never warm up.

The appendix of Glimpses of a Great Soul is quite sizable with letters and lectures of Swami Saradananda and other articles of permanent interest. In an article in the appendix, the memories of Sri Ramakrishna by his great disciple, Girish Ghosh, is a masterpiece of vividness. The attraction exercised by the forgiving and all-encompassing love of the saviour of the fallen, a confirmed rake, is recounted artistically and with poetic charm. Vignettes of Sri Ramakrishna from Swami Saradananda’s biography are interesting.

In the second chapter of the Gita, Sri Krishna is asked by Arjuna, ‘What is the mark of him who is steady in mind and steadfast in contemplation, O Keshava? How does the steady-minded man talk; how does he sit; how does he walk?’ Glimpses of a Great Soul is the biography of such a man. It also gives extracts from his writings, mentioning the sources of his inspiration. By pondering over such sublime lives we can also hope to have a glimpse of the glow of their holy company.

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