

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



November 2014

Vol. 119, No. 11

₹ 10.00

# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON

## *Dedication to Yoga*

**G**ive up all argumentation and other distractions. Is there anything in dry intellectual jargon? It only throws the mind off its balance and disturbs it. Things of subtler planes have to be realized. Will talking do that? So give up all vain talk. Be like the pearl oyster. First hear, then understand, and then, leaving all distractions, shut your minds to outside influences, and devote yourselves to developing the truth within you. There is the danger of frittering away your energies by taking up an idea only for its novelty, and then giving it up for another that is newer. Take one thing up and do it, and see the end of it, and before you have seen the end, do not give it up. He who can become mad with an idea, he alone sees light. Those that only take a nibble here and a nibble there will never attain anything. They may titillate their nerves for a moment, but there it will end. They will be slaves in the hands of nature, and will never get beyond the senses.

Those who really want to be Yogis must give up, once for all, this nibbling at things. Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life—think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success, and this is the way great spiritual giants



are produced. Others are mere talking machines. If we really want to be blessed, and make others blessed, we must go deeper. The first step is not to disturb the mind, not to associate with persons whose ideas are disturbing. Practise hard; whether you live or die does not matter. You have to plunge in and work, without thinking of the result. It is no use simply to take a course of lessons. To those who are full of Tamas, ignorant and dull—who only crave for something to amuse them—religion and philosophy are simply objects of entertainment. These are the unpersevering. They hear a talk, think it very nice, and then go home and forget all about it. To succeed, you must have tremendous perseverance, tremendous will. 'I will drink the ocean,' says the persevering soul, 'at my will mountains will crumble up.' Have that sort of energy, that sort of will, work hard and you will reach the goal.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2013), 1.194–96.



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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राथ्य वराग्निबोधत ।

*Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

November 2014  
Vol. 119, No. 11

## The Boat of Knowledge

Acharya Shankara

### विज्ञान-नौका

अनन्तं विभुं सर्वयोनिं निरीहं शिवं संगहीनं यदोंकारगम्यम् ।  
निराकारमत्युज्ज्वलं मृत्युहीनं परं ब्रह्म नित्यं तदेवाहमस्मि ॥ ७ ॥

*Anantam vibhum sarva-yonim niriham shivam sangahinam yadomkaragamyam  
Nirakaramatyujjvalam mrityuhinam param brahma nityam tadevahamasmi (7)*

That which is infinite, all-pervading, source of all, free from all endeavours, benign, unattached, [and is] attainable by *Om*; [that which is] formless, effulgent, deathless; I am indeed that supreme eternal Brahman.

यदानन्दसिन्धौ निमग्नः पुमान्यादविद्याविलासः समस्तप्रपञ्चः ।  
तदा न स्फुरत्यद्भुतं यन्निमित्तं परं ब्रह्म नित्यं तदेवाहमस्मि ॥ ८ ॥

*Yadananda-sindhau nimagnah puman syad-avidya-vilasaḥ samasta-prapancaḥ  
Tada na sphuratyadbhutam yannimittam param brahma nityam tadevahamasmi (8)*

When a person is immersed in the ocean of bliss, then the entire universe—which is the manifestation of ignorance—does not reveal itself. That which is wonderful and the cause [of this universe]; I am indeed that supreme eternal Brahman.

स्वरूपानुसन्धानरूपां स्तुतिं यः पठेदादराद्भक्तिभावो मनुष्यः ।  
शृणोतीह वा नित्यमुद्युक्तचित्तो भवेद्विष्णुरत्रैव वेदप्रमाणात् ॥ ९ ॥

*Svarupanusandhana-rupam stutim yah patedadarad bhaktibhavo manushyah  
Shrinotiha va nityam-udyukta-chitto bhaved-vishnuratraiva veda-pramanat (9)*

One who recites with respect and devotion this hymn about the inquiry into one's true nature, or one who, while living in this world, always listens with a focused mind [to the scriptures], that person will become one with Vishnu in this very birth—this is attested by the Vedas.

# THIS MONTH

**W**HETHER OR NOT A PERSON should be allowed to end her or his life is a question that haunts the present-day society, particularly with the advances in medicine, which enable death to be delayed. The option to put an end to one's life, euthanasia, is explored in **To Die or Not To Die**.

The environment gives us the space and the resources to live and flourish. Our philosophies and beliefs influence our relationship with the environment. Dr Pankaj Jain, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion Studies, University of North Texas, explores the relation between **Vedanta and Ecology**. The role of women in preserving and transmitting values and cultural ethos cannot be overemphasized. They also play a vital role in maintaining our harmony with nature so that successive generations too can use nature's resources. Dwaita Hazra, a research scholar at the Cultural Studies Research Department, Jain University, Bengaluru, deals with the relation between **Women and Environment Conservation**.

Sister Nivedita is a personality whose greatness is yet to be understood by all. How thrilling it would be, if one could trace her descendants, talk to them, and hear the anecdotes and descriptions of Sister Nivedita from those who consider themselves closer to her. Sarada Sarkar from Croydon embarks on such a journey in **Tracing Sister Nivedita's Family**. She meets many of the descendants of the relatives of Sister Nivedita, interviews them, and brings to light some interesting nuggets of information with equally interesting photographs.

Gender should never be an obstacle to living one's dreams. There should be no gender discrimination. Social developments involving gender were analysed in a seminar in Kolkata, some years back. Sarbasri Goswami, a teacher of English at the Bethune Collegiate School, Kolkata, describes her **Experiencing A Seminar**, and provides fresh perspectives on gender and related issues.

Swami Pavitrananda, former Minister-in-charge, Vedanta Society of New York, tells us in **The Practice of Devotion** that spiritual practice and belief are the foremost prerequisites for cultivating devotion. This is an edited transcript of a talk delivered in 1953.

Critical thinking has always helped the cause of religion. It is often a critique that puts in perspective the function of a religious doctrine. Concepts of forgiveness and redemption too need a critical analysis, which gives them a breath of fresh air and frees their practice from dogmatism. These issues are dealt with by Joe E Barnhart, former Professor of Philosophy and Religion Studies at the University of North Texas and former President of the American Academy of Religion, Southwest division, in the final instalment of **Religious Dimensions of Karl Popper's Philosophy**.

How we think and act upon depends on the health of our neurological system, which is inherited from our parents through genes. This relation of the brain, the neural network, and genes, is discussed by Swami Satyamayananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Kanpur in **Memory**.



## *To Die or Not To Die*

**N**O, THIS IS NOT A DISCUSSION on Shakespearean rhetoric, neither is it a commentary on the mental state of Hamlet. This is a discussion on a deeper question, a question about the life and death of a human being, quite literally so. While we do not decide on our birth, do we have the right to decide on our death? That is the question, the burning question, which has been consuming endless hours of intellectual deliberations of countless people over the past few decades. How did this discussion begin? It all began with a choice that technology gave us. Paradoxically, the choice was to keep a human being alive even in a physical condition that would have previously been equated with death. An accident, a convulsion, a concussion, or any other damage to the brain, can break the brain and put the body into a vegetative state. Earlier, that was the time to fix the funeral date. Not anymore. Now it is the time to put that body on a contraption, variously called ventilator or respirator, make the heart and lungs work by force, and wait for the brain to magically recover and bring back life and action to that inactive body. One waits and hopes that the dying fluorescent bulb of the body in its last flickers may suddenly come to life and continue with a steady glow.

The innovation of the medical ventilator or a respirator is a very old one, as early as the 1920s. Initially used on patients with breathing problems, the medical ventilator was developed to sustain life of patients under anaesthesia during surgery. Advances in modern medicine are unimaginable

without this invention. Today, complicated surgeries of the heart and brain are performed with ease, sometimes even by machines, because of this medical ventilation. So, the technology is not to be blamed. The problem lies in its application in some cases. Here we are discussing 'euthanasia', which etymologically means 'good death', and denotes the practice of willingly putting an end to one's life to stop pain and suffering. Yet, this is precisely the problem. In the conditions that lead to a patient being put on the ventilator, almost always the patient is not conscious, and the decision to put an end to her or his life has to be taken by others. So, in such circumstances, euthanasia does not quite fulfil its definition.

However, euthanasia is not just about patients on ventilators. It is also about people who are very much conscious and in a lot of pain and suffering. For example, patients with terminal illnesses, which do not have any hope of a cure. That is why the question of euthanasia is a major one in palliative care, the care of the terminally ill. Discussions and debates on euthanasia are consequently broadly divided into two possibilities, one called voluntary euthanasia, where the patient is conscious and the other called involuntary euthanasia, where the patient is not conscious. Generally, involuntary euthanasia is equated with murder. Unlike the ventilator, the concept and practice of euthanasia dates back thousands of years. Instances of euthanasia can be found in historical records, literature, mythology, and even religious texts. Some religions like Hinduism permit their adherents to end their lives

in case of unbearable physical suffering that prevents one from doing religious practices. Ancient Indian texts on medicine have references to euthanasia. However, modern medicine started using the term only in the seventeenth century.

The definition of euthanasia thus raises three critical questions in every instance where this practice may be considered an option: Whether the patient is conscious, whether the patient is free from suffering, and whether there is a cure? Any attempt by a person to end a patient's life, without the patient's consent when the answer to even one of these questions is a yes, will be considered as murder. The debate is primarily about: Whether someone other than the patient can put an end to the life of the patient when she or he is unconscious, is suffering, and there is no cure? Also, whether the patient, who is conscious and suffering, can end her or his life when there is no cure? Even if the patient is unconscious, another person could end the patient's life as a 'merciful' act to relieve the patient of pain and suffering. If one thinks that these are simple yes or no questions, they are greatly mistaken. The problem is complex because these questions are qualitative and difficult to counter-check. And there arises the fourth question: Whether there is sufficient reason for taking the decision of euthanasia? If ever there was an issue where all the factors were arbitrary, euthanasia is the one. All the same, one should be clear as to what is not euthanasia. Abortion, suicide, murder, and denying treatment—not withdrawal of treatment—are not euthanasia.

The greatest danger with euthanasia is that it can easily become a euphemism for outright killing. It is difficult to decide whether or not one should consent to euthanasia. Interestingly, many people opt for withdrawal of treatment for terminally ill patients rather than choosing to end their lives. Though in effect, they are almost

the same, no one wants to be held responsible for someone else's death. Some people opine that a person's right to live would also translate as one's right to die. In the absence of an incurable ailment, such an argument could only lead to the justification of suicide. Since euthanasia is not legal in many places, doctors sometimes take advantage of this and keep a dead person on a ventilator to increase the medical bill! Conversely, the near and dear ones of the patient who is administered euthanasia, suffer an indescribable trauma and for the rest of their lives, have to carry the burden of having ended the life of their loved one. This decision is also traumatic for the doctor who had been treating the patient. After all, every doctor wants to heal patients, not put them to rest.

The issue of euthanasia is being much debated now. Lawmakers worldwide are trying to find out the pros and cons of legalizing euthanasia. Movements for and against it are being started. The media is filled with debates and discussions on it. A definite decision eludes us. And this makes one to ask: Is there a single criterion which would determine the validity or need for euthanasia? Yes, there is one, and that is love. If a person decides to end the life of a terminally ill patient, it should be because that patient is a loved one, and the suffering of a loved one is unbearable. If a doctor assists in the euthanasia of a conscious patient, it should be because of the love the doctor has for the patient and the love the patient's family has for the patient. Love is unselfish and so all instances of euthanasia with even the remotest gain to the person who ends the patient's life should be seen only as murder. Love can be the only litmus test of euthanasia. Arbitrary though it may be, it can be the only justification to decide on behalf of another, act on behalf of another, an act which would otherwise be called murder.



# Vedanta and Ecology

Dr Pankaj Jain and Ms Rena Mammen

**A**DVAITA VEDANTA, or non-dual Vedanta, has many foundational teachings that would aid those trying to understand the connections between Vedanta and ecology, especially when considering that Vedanta is ‘the synthesis of all other systems’<sup>1</sup> of Indian philosophy and religion. Troy Organ states that Vedanta is the ‘only Indian philosophy which *directly* plays a part in modern Indian civilization’ (ibid.), and one could assume that it perpetually moulds and affects the socio-economic dynamics of Indian thought and lifestyle. This essay includes reflections on an interview with Pravrajika Brahma-prana, resident minister of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Texas. It also includes a discussion on the basic beliefs and contentions regarding nature as viewed in Vedanta with special emphasis on Swami Vivekananda due to his tremendous influence in both the East and the West.

## **Advaita Vedanta and Ecology**

Advaita Vedanta has its origins in the Upanishads and holds that Brahman is both the material and the immediate cause of the universe. It can be realized and such realization leads to liberation. Acharya Shankara propounded Advaita Vedanta and wrote extensive commentaries to establish this thought. He stressed that the underlying reality of the universe is Brahman. Brahman is the ‘foundation of all existence, the ultimate basis of all things’ (97). One could now inquire that if Brahman is the only reality, then what sort of reality does the world have?

Acharya Shankara answers this question with the concept of *maya*, which is described by Organ as the power of Brahman ‘to manifest itself in a world which has *iva* [as it were] reality’ (100). In other words, the world is *maya* or illusion. This is not to say that the world is completely unreal, rather it means that the world is real only relative to Brahman and without Brahman, the absolute reality, the world would not have any aspect of reality. However, others would say that the followers of Vedanta, especially the world-renouncing ascetics, have rejected the illusory world and therefore have rejected any role in protecting the world’s environment. The concept of *maya* is confusing to scholars attempting to demonstrate the presence of a stable environmental ethic within Vedanta. If the world were simply an illusion, then Vedanta would not be an eco-friendly system of thought and religion in that Vedanta would not value the world and things of the world. Organ states that ‘Liberation or salvation in Advaita Vedanta is self-realization. The process of liberation will usually begin when a person becomes disgusted with worldly life’ (109). This concept is interesting when juxtaposed with the following concept: ‘The world *as it appears to us* is unreal because it has no absolute existence; but *in its essential nature*, as Brahman, the world is absolutely real, for it is Brahman that appears in this form, without undergoing any change whatsoever.’<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the ‘worldly life’ is seen as disgusting, and on the other, the world is perceived as one with Brahman. These two concepts actually go

together quite well in Vedanta, if one remembers that ‘worldly life’ comprises worldly passions and lusts such as stealing and hoarding and ‘the world’ comprises the apparent multitude of jivas that are identical with Brahman, such as humans, animals, and plants.

In his book, Organ focuses on the doctrine of oneness found in Advaita Vedanta, but relates this doctrine only to the oneness among jivas or individual human souls and not of the entire world. He says that ‘all men are in reality identical with each other and with Brahman.’<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Organ never posits a relationship between all the different jivas of the world. Instead, he says that ‘things of the empirical world ... owe their meaning and significance to the self’ (106). Of course, Organ is emphasizing ‘The Self in Advaita Vedanta’ in his book *The Self in Indian Philosophy*, so one should not be utterly confused by his outright exclusion of the other billions of life-forms, but it is interesting to note his relatively common emphasis on the human self and most of humankind.

When questioned about asceticism in Vedanta, Pravrajika Brahma-prana emphasized that divinity, in the dualistic sense, could be found in four material things: in the consecrated food, food offered to temple deities; in the soil of Vrindavan; in the air of Varanasi; and in the holy river Ganga. The Vedanta Society kept water from the river Ganga on their altar to use for purification purposes. Accordingly, the emphasis on rejection of the world would be more accurate if focused on the rejection of a ‘worldly’ lifestyle

instead. Indeed, the language in Organ’s quote about liberation refers to ‘worldly life’—most likely worldly activities—and not necessarily the world itself. Furthermore, the goal of Acharya Shankara’s teachings in his avid religious language seems to be to lead followers to a deeper devotion and respect for Brahman, the cause of all existence, rather than to a hatred or devaluation of the world itself. Rather than hating the world, Vedanta followers worship symbols of nature and focus on the divinity inherent in nature. Pravrajika Brahma-prana says that this



sort of worship is obvious when one notes that restoring something to its original state is a form of worshipping symbols of nature. For instance, restoring the river Ganga to its original state is a means to venerate the river. In fact, restoring nature to its natural beauty is supported at the monastery in Irving, because, as Pravrajika Brahma-prana says, ‘God is manifested in beauty.’<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the monastery grounds have gardens to promote the sort of oasis that

would illustrate God’s manifestation through beauty. By the same token, desecrating beauty is against the spiritual law of Vedanta.

On a slightly different note, in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the story of an ascetic who emphasizes non-attachment leads Lance Nelson to conclude that one’s reverence should be ‘toward its proper object: the Self’<sup>5</sup> or Atman, and all others that are not Atman, even nature, is without value. Nelson declares that Vedanta encourages the ‘devaluation and neglect of the natural universe’ (62) while followers of Vedanta like Pravrajika

Brahmaprana stress that passages such as the following from the Upanishads reflect the attitude of love towards nature: 'May the herbs be sweet unto us. To earth, hail. ... May the dust of the earth be sweet. May heaven, our father, be sweet to us. ... may the cows be filled with sweetness' (54).

Swami Vivekananda is generally more focused on the socio-economic status of India rather than her environment. Vivekananda did say some things about nature:

Does not nature do a million times more than that every moment? Why not then fall down and worship nature? ... Man is born to conquer nature, it is true, but the Occidental means by "nature" only the physical or external nature. It is true that external nature is majestic, with its mountains, and oceans, and rivers, and with its infinite powers and varieties. Yet there is a more majestic internal nature of man, higher than the sun, moon, and stars, higher than this earth of ours, higher than the physical universe, transcending these little lives of ours.<sup>6</sup>

Vivekananda also seems more concerned with the betterment of human life than with the state of the environment: 'Our duty to others means helping others; doing good to the world. Why should we do good to the world? Apparently to help the world, but really to help ourselves. ... if we consider well, we find that the world does not require our help at all. This world was not made that you or I should come and help it' (1.75). Vivekananda does not clarify this statement, but he does say that we should 'learn that the whole of life is giving, that nature will force you to give. ... The forest is gone, but we get heat in return. The sun is taking up water from the ocean, to return it in showers. You are a machine for taking and giving: you take, in order to give' (2.5). Initially, one may think that this is Vivekananda's justification for the environmental degradation committed by humans. However, perhaps he is simply illustrating the complexity of issues such

as these. Man needs the forests in order to survive, but perhaps cutting down and burning an entire forest is wasteful. Is Vivekananda attempting to bring to man's attention the need to give back to the earth? These are just two of many ways to interpret this statement. Furthermore, who will 'help the world' (1.75) if not humans? This statement makes Vivekananda seem indifferent towards the role of man in helping the world, especially if he meant that the world was created in order for a Personal Brahman to take care of it. However, unlike Organ's interpretation of older Vedanta texts, Vivekananda does recognize the oneness between humans and other life on earth when he says 'In India it has been preached, "love all beings as yourselves"; we make no distinction between men and animals. And the reason is there in the idea of an Impersonal God; you understand it when you learn that the whole world is one—the oneness of the universe—the solidarity of all life—that in hurting any one I am hurting myself' (3.129). Indeed, Vivekananda was most likely influenced by similar passages in the Upanishads. Specifically, the *Aitareya Upanishad* says:

This one is Brahman ... this is all these gods; and this is these five elements, namely earth, air, space, water, fire; and this is all these together with the tiny ones, that are the procreators of others and are referable in pairs—to wit, those that are born of eggs, of wombs, of moisture, and of the earth, namely horses, cattle, men elephants, and all the creatures that there are which move or fly and those which do not move. All these are impelled by consciousness; all these have consciousness as the giver of their reality; the universe has consciousness as its eye, and consciousness is its end. Consciousness is Brahman.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant to note how all forms of life are believed to be derived from Brahman—humans

are not made to be superior to other life forms, we are just a different type of life. The idea of a superior human nature is brought forth by Vivekananda in a statement apparently contradictory to the quotation from the *Aitareya Upanishad*. It is difficult to consolidate the idea of oneness in nature if the 'internal nature of man' is 'more majestic' than the physical universe or even celestial bodies as Vivekananda postulates. However, when Vivekananda talks of 'internal nature of man', he means the true nature of human beings as consciousness. But then Brahman also forms the internal nature of all beings big and small, as the *Aitareya Upanishad* states. The most reasonable interpretation of Vivekananda's statement seems to allude to man's ability to reason.


### **Nature and Vedanta in Practice**

Without nature the mind would not be as free to gain inspiration, for it is the vastness of nature that allows the mind to be lifted up and reside in harmony with it. This is why Sri Ramakrishna taught that one should go into solitude in nature and Swami Vivekananda always longed for even a short stay amidst nature. This is also why Vedanta monasteries in India are located amidst natural settings. Indeed, the reality of Brahman is also recognized through the unity of man and nature, and 'the earth and all living beings are mutually dependent'.<sup>8</sup> Nelson glosses over Eliot Deutsch's elusive paper, 'Vedanta and Ecology' and quotes Deutsch's assertion that the Advaitic ideas of karma, unity, and reverence of all living beings are 'critical to any adequate environmental ethic' (64). Karma is actually based on the idea that humanity is connected with all things in the natural world. So it is typical to assume that humanity shares an essential identity with all living things and should revere everything in nature because of

the 'intrinsic spiritual worth' (ibid.) found in life. Reverence for life takes various forms in Vedanta. Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, said that one should spend an hour every day in the garden, because 'working with the soil makes one honest'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Vedanta Society of Southern California's monastery in Santa Barbara requires the residents to maintain a vegetable garden on the fifty acres it holds.

So, concerning the possibility of an ecologically oriented practicality in Vedanta, there are many duties within the monastic routine that contribute to Vedanta's environmental ethics. The residents of the monasteries conserve electricity and water, recycle, cultivate vegetable and flower gardens, and live a simple life, never wasting or using things excessively. Pravrajika Brahma-prana suggests that such simple life holds values taken from phenomena witnessed on this planet; the earth is simple, so a spiritual person should not be complex. To elucidate, the earth's life cycle is a circular one. For example, rain comes down to earth from the clouds, is absorbed into streams and dirt and then taken back up into the atmosphere to repeat the cycle. So, a human being should also be the giving and taking machine that Vivekananda describes. However, the human being does not seem to be fitting into the role of the give and take machine as efficiently as Mother Earth has over billions of years, because the human being has become accustomed to taking copiously and giving back insufficiently. It seems that the human being is living in the present. It is sufficient that for now we have heat stemming from the wood of the forests, as Vivekananda puts it, but the fact that the forests are rapidly disappearing and leaving deserts behind is not pressing on mankind's collective mind. About the question of evil and creation, Sri Ramana Maharishi says:

Creation is neither good nor bad; it is as it is. It is the human mind which puts all sorts of constructions on it, as it sees things from its own angle and as it suits its own interests. ... Men love women, hate snakes, and are indifferent to the grass and stones by the roadside. These connections are the causes of all the misery in the world. In creation there is room for everything, but man refuses to see the good, the healthy and the beautiful, and goes on whining, like the hungry man who sits beside a tasty dish and, instead of stretching out his hand to satisfy his hunger, he goes on lamenting. Whose fault is it, God's or man's?<sup>10</sup>

Humans are doomed to lamenting about the current state of ecological crisis if they do not realize that the tattered state of the environment is predominantly the effect of overconsumption of natural resources and the overproduction of the prevalent technological era. As Maharishi says, there is room in creation for everything, and this concept can be taken to support a belief that there is room for a simple lifestyle for all of mankind, but much must be sacrificed in order to save the planet. Advaita Vedanta's teachings concerning nature and the unity of life on earth are critical contributions to a positive environmentalism largely due to the synthesis of Indian religions that have formed the foundation of its tenets. The positive attitudes of nature in the Upanishads, the foundational texts of non-dualistic Vedanta, also play a vital role in the forming of beliefs concerning nature and all living things. Vedanta is one of the many systems of religious philosophy that contribute to the reverence and respect for the environment, and it is essential that people do not point fingers of blame at others but instead accept responsibility for the damage done to our world's ecosystems and begin to recognize and support the hallowed beauty of the earth. 



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# Women and Environment Conservation

Dwaita Hazra

**E**NVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION is the need of the hour. 'Environment Conservation' is a modern term. It is a systematic process of protecting the environment. It includes the whole system of environment comprising trees, human beings, animals, and every other living being on earth. The aim is to maintain a right balance in the environment and to protect certain species of living beings from total extinction. Biodiversity protection is one of the ultimate aims of conservation. This is possible with the help of science and technology. New methods of conservation are being invented and implemented.

## **Nature Conservation**

Conservation is a huge process because it includes all the organisms and it is based on their relationship with one another. To understand this relationship one needs to see it from a different angle. The perspective of science and technology is also important but with that the empathy of traditional knowledge should be combined. According to Paul Taylor's 'biocentric outlook'<sup>1</sup> the natural world is a system of interdependence. The survival and flourishing of each living being not only depends on the physical environment but also on their relationship with other living beings. 'When one accepts the biocentric outlook, the whole realm of life is understood to exemplify a vast complex of relationships of interdependence' (340).

This relationship was the core value of ancient Indian idea of conservation. The main

focus was on the relationship between all the living beings. The humans were not the centre point of the idea. There was no differentiation or categorization between human beings and other species. It was naturally understood that all the lives are interlinked and the great bond of empathy and respect was established. This idea of conservation was not an imposed idea. It came naturally as love for her children comes naturally to a mother. Traditional knowledge is learned by experience, nurtured and passed from one generation to another. Therefore in the present times environment conservation is a process to protect the environment with the help of scientific, technological, social, and agricultural knowledge. But one thing is missing, that is to understand environment in an environment-centric way. Most of the environment related things are seen in a human-centric way. The ancient Indian way of conserving nature was mainly dependent on understanding nature in its own way. It was also dependent on seeing all the elements of environment as one. The teachings of Vedanta enable us to see this oneness in everything and help us to identify ourselves with nature. Swami Vivekananda said: 'Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself.'<sup>2</sup> He says, 'In the lowest worm, as well as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present' (ibid.).

## **Nature, the Feminine**

When we think about the ancient Indian



perspective on environment we are compelled to think about the fact that most of the environment related things are expressed in the feminine gender. The rivers, the night, the forest, or the dawn, even the planet in which we are living is described in the feminine gender. The environment itself is called 'Prakriti', which is a feminine term. Natural objects are described as mother, sister, young maiden, and daughter. Thus ancient Indian people tried to make a strong bond with nature.

As women have many roles to play in a family, the environment also has many different roles to act in. When the earth is described as mother, she is the originator of living beings. As the mother protects the baby in her womb, similarly the earth also nurtures the seeds of crops in her soil. The Vedas praise the earth: 'On whom [are] the ocean and the river, the waters; on whom food, ploughings, came into being; on whom quickens this that breathes, that stirs—let that earth set us in first drinking;<sup>3</sup> 'On whom the circulating waters flow the same, night and day, without failure—let that earth, of many streams yield us milk; then let her sprinkle [us] with splendour' (12.1.9). It is the scripture's way of conveying the message that the soil and the water are sacred. We should never pollute them. We should show the earth the same respect we have for our mother.

In the Atharva Veda the earth is praised in sixty-three mantras: 'Mistress of what is and what is to be' (12.1.1). 'Unoppressedness in the midst of human beings. Whose are the ascents, the advances, the much plain; who bears the herbs of various virtue—let the earth be spread out for us, be prosperous for us' (12.1.2). 'All-bearing, good-holding, firm-standing, gold-breasted, reposer of moving things, bearing the universal fire' (12.1.6). 'What of you, O earth, I dig out, let that quickly grow over, let me not hit your vitals nor your heart, O cleansing one' (12.1.35).

The earth is imagined as the mother and all of us are her children. She never discriminates while giving her precious offerings. Therefore we should not consider the environment as 'the other'. Here a universal bond is established between all parts of the environment and respect for all of them is invoked. The earth is described as mother because of her feminine qualities of patience, kindness, and nourishment. She gives us food, shelter, and everything we need to live, in their purest form. Therefore, we must protect our mother and we must respect her. This thought is found in the 'Prithivi Sukta'. The concept of the motherhood of earth unites us. It contains the message of universal peace and brotherhood. 'Prithivi Sukta' does not belong to any particular country, people, or culture,



and has a universal appeal. The earth belongs to everyone and everyone has the responsibility to protect it. Nature has been portrayed as feminine to show us that all of us, irrespective of gender, should nurture certain qualities in ourselves to understand the environment and protect it from any hazard.

Environment has certain attributes that are similar to women. This connection between environment and femininity is now called 'Eco-feminism'. Eco-feminism connects feminism with ecology and relates the exploitation of women with that of the environment. The connection of nature and women in ancient India is often described as 'spiritual eco-feminism' where the environment is presented in the feminine gender and termed as sacred and divine.

### Women and Conservation

Ancient Indian literature was the reflection of the bond between humans and nature, especially between women and nature. Classical literature depicts this bond skilfully. For instance in *Abhijnana-shakuntalam*, the great poet Kalidasa showed how Shakuntala nurtured an intense relationship with the environment—trees, animals, and forest:

She who was not willing to drink first  
if you had not been watered,  
she who, though fond of ornaments,  
would not pick buds out of affection for you,



for whom the occasion of the first awakening  
of your flowers was a festival,  
that Shakuntala leaves for her husband's house,  
given permission by all of you.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Tapovan' was a place where a great bond was established between human beings and nature. Trees were looked upon as brothers, sisters, or relatives: 'Father, I will bid farewell to my tendril-sister, the madhavi-vine' (4.120; 201). In the fourth act is a melancholic scene, where Shakuntala is going to her husband's house after her marriage, leaving her father. Not only her friends and relatives are sad, but also the forest, the trees, and the animals are reflecting their deepest sorrow and pain. Trees are shedding tears in the form of leaves. Moreover, Shakuntala is also feeling the same way for her fellow beings:

The doe lets go its mouthful of darbha grass,  
the peacock is weary of dancing,  
the vines, dropping yellow leaves,  
seem to have trembling limbs (4.120; 201).

Shakuntala also expresses her concern for the pregnant deer: 'Father! When this doe, roaming at the edge of the hut, slow with child, is about to give birth, please send me someone to announce the happy news' (4.129; 203).

In the Rig Veda, the forest goddess Aranyani is presented as the protector of forest. She is the protector of flora and fauna. This concept of representation of forest by a female deity can be seen in most of India's forest region. Indian women, the 'Aranyani Sukta', and forest conservation—these three are interrelated. Since Vedic civilization, women are integral to forest conservation. Aranyani is the representation of that relationship. The village people, particularly older women, always know much more about the forest. Every day, every year, every generation, they would go among the trees, apologize to the goddess of the forest, and say: 'I'm sorry for hurting you, but I know you

understand that I need to take this much fire-wood and this much fodder to look after my family. I promise I will never take more than I absolutely need.’<sup>5</sup>

### **Conservation in the Indian Tradition**

The ‘Aranyani Sukta’ has a universal appeal. It is a depiction of our compassion and care towards the forest and the wild. Though the form of the goddess Aranyani is not seen, her voice is often heard through the voice of the wild: ‘Aranyani, Aranyani, who are, as it were, perishing there, why do you not inquire of the village, does not fear assail you? When the Chichchika [a small bird] replies to the crying Vrisharava [a small animal], Aranyani is exalted, resonant, as with cymbals.’<sup>6</sup> This voice can only be felt if we listen with the much needed compassion and love.

‘Indian forests are a treasure house of food and medicine. Rural people knew how to use the abundantly available nutrients of the forest plants, and the knowledge was handed down to them from generation to generation.’<sup>7</sup> So the involvement of local people is an integral part of forest management. The main threat to forest conservation is our materialistic approach towards the environment. In ancient times women and the forest were both highly respected and deified by people. The position of both women and the forest degraded when society began treating them as mere objects with some utility. The divinity of forest is now confined to mere romanticism. Policies for forest conservation do not reflect this divinity.

The position of both forest and women has gradually degraded. Legal protection of the plants was stipulated by the authors of moral codes. It was the moral responsibility of a ruler to manage forest resources in pursuit of the economic and social welfare of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> A substantial income is supposed to come to the

state from its forest wealth. In *Manusmriti* it is described that in order to protect forests, gardens, natural, and artificial groves from thieves the king should appoint soldiers, ‘both stationary and patrolling, and spies.’<sup>9</sup>

*Arthashastra* calls for the appointment of a superintendent of forest produce who ‘shall collect timber and other products of forests by employing those who guard productive forests. He shall not only start productive works in forests, but also fix adequate fines and compensations to be levied from those who cause any damage to productive forests except in calamities.’<sup>10</sup> The *Matsya Purana* has a famous saying: ‘One tree is equal to ten sons.’<sup>11</sup>

There is a strong correlation between violation of dharma and destruction of the earth. Presently we can see this violation of dharma everywhere. Women and the environment are suffering because people have become increasingly impatient and cruel. Ancient women were caring towards forest. They could more easily identify themselves with trees. But, sometimes modern women and men are more materialistic and detached from environment. They are attracted to just the products of the environment. Industrialists are using this situation in their favour. We need to change our consumption habits besides strengthening our conservation policies.


All of us are consumers of wildlife in one way or another. We eat wildlife produce and also wear it as clothing and accessories. We consume it as medicine and buy ornaments and souvenirs made from it. We might eat fish and caviar, and wear shoes made from crocodile and snake skin. Hence our consumption habits definitely affect wildlife because the goods we demand come from wildlife rich areas. We wear diamond and sapphire jewellery made from stones mined in areas where gorillas and lemurs



live. We carry mobile phones which use coltan, eighty per cent of which comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area that has the Kahuzi Biega National Park, where the Mountain Gorilla lives. Mining of coltan is hazardous to this species of gorilla. Through global consumer culture our everyday lives are bound up with the fate of wildlife that is far from us.

Usually people are not aware of what they are using, what components such equipment may consist, and from where they are procured. Lemurs and other rare species are threatened by sapphire mining in Madagascar. The international market for high quality sapphire is responsible for this. In the words of an environmentalist: 'Conservation organizations need to educate consumers, and those customers need to demand that the sapphires they buy are produced under the highest ethical and environmental standards.'<sup>12</sup>

We can see that our lifestyle, habits of buying things, and unlimited craving for more is the main problem. Before blaming others we should control our behaviour. If there is no wildlife, no biodiversity, no food, how can we survive? We cannot

eat diamonds or sapphires. To live we need simple things. This is where we need to lead simple lives and understand the difference between comfort and luxury. Great personalities have taught us how to lead a simple life in harmony with nature. Women have a deeper connection with nature. It is urgent that we realize this bond and act accordingly. More women should participate in environmental conservation and decision making. Only then can we do better environmental conservation. 

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# Tracing Sister Nivedita's Family

Sarada Sarkar

ON ANCESTRY WEBSITES, people strive to discover long lost relations and family members whom they were previously oblivious of. It is almost impossible to describe the emotions of deep familial joy and sorrow that are embedded in these electronic pages. The abundance of photographs, diary entries, letters, and official records carry us through timeless family traditions, and despite being separated by many miles of land and sea, they are all bound to a common family tree. With some luck one may find birth and death certificates and even immigration records of when their relatives settled in different parts of the world. The census at the time also reveals the addresses they lived at, the number of people they lived with, and the kind of relationship they bore with their cohabitants—all of which is officially recorded in the database. In an Indian scenario, it may even be possible to locate one's long lost twin brother who had disappeared in the Kumbha Mela! This can be likened to the records of the mythical Chitrugupta, the record-keeper of the Lord of Death, from whom information has never gone amiss.

After months of research and struggle, I finally found what my heart had desired—the records of Sister Nivedita's family. Nivedita, Ireland's very own daughter, whom Swamiji called 'The mistress, servant, friend in one'<sup>1</sup>, was rediscovered like a sunken ship that had been lying in the deepest depths of the sea for many years.

## Inspiration for the Search

Sister Nivedita and my family have an interesting connection. My grandmother was the daughter of the very conservative Hatkhola Dutta family of north Calcutta. She was born in 1906 at Fariapukur Street and attended Sister Nivedita's girls' school during its early years. My great grandfather Bhupendranath Dutta, complied with Sister Nivedita's request to send the girls to her school on the condition that they would travel in a covered carriage and be escorted back to the house. When my grandmother's sisters attended the school, Sister Nivedita was in a leading role; although when my grandmother herself attended the school, Sister Christine had taken over. My grandmother had told me stories of how Sister Christine would take my grandmother in her lap and make the journey to school. She also told me



*Sister Nivedita,  
Just After Completing High School*



Sister Nivedita's Wimbledon House

how she remembered to offer flowers to the Holy Mother in person, and that she remembered Sister Sudhira, Sister Sarala, and other details that are now blurred memories.

The house where I live now is a stone's throw from where Sister Nivedita lived in Wimbledon in 1899 when Swamiji arrived in London and was living with Swami Turiyananda. Swamiji used to visit the Noble family despite his poor health. Today, the ringing of the bell of the very same door is met with a dead silence, no matter how many times you try. We hear that a frail old person lives there as a sitting tenant and that his children come to look after him, which incidentally, is the only time the door opens. Today the owner of the house is a certain Patel of Indian origin. Should he have been available we may have gained access to the house, but having been left with no such choice I simply took a photograph of the window of 21A Wimbledon High Street. This triggered the desire to explore ancestry websites and touch unknown horizons.



Richmond, Nivedita's brother

### Rediscovering the Nobles

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi used to call Sister Nivedita *khuki*, a young girl, but as per Irish tradition, her mother Isabella called her Margo or Margot. Of her three siblings Richard, May, and Richmond, Richard died just months after being born. This was the first death in the Noble family and hence the cemetery at Great Torrington is named after Richard Noble. Father Samuel, mother Isabella, and Sister Nivedita followed, to rest in eternal peace.

Being ten years younger, Richmond was much pampered and protected by the whole family. As a student he lived with his sister while she taught at Ruskin School in Wimbledon. When Swamiji arrived in Wimbledon in 1899, Richmond was staying in this house. Richmond complained once about Sister Nivedita prohibiting him from eating beef. When Swamiji learned of this, he took Richmond to the nearest restaurant and ordered a beef platter and said, 'Brother Richmond, please enjoy this. I am giving you the freedom that Nivedita denied you.' This act perplexed Richmond, who wondered who this Hindu swami was, who dared practise beyond the orthodoxy of the Hindu religion.

I therefore ventured into the world of the ancestors, rummaging through records from bygone years to seek my prized target, Richmond's family. Richmond's wife belonged to the Sewell family and while searching through his records, I stumbled upon Sheila Gilmour-Buttinger who is a distant relative of the Sewell family. She now resides in Belgium. This young lady in her late twenties was also then

delving into her family history when she was startled to discover Nivedita in her family tree. Being only a distant relative of Sister Nivedita, all previous contacts had been lost as it happens these days, and therefore it was no surprise that she had very little information in this matter. However, she did provide me with some vital material from British newspaper archives about Nivedita's cremation and more. After months of tireless research, I had finally found the right person, Elizabeth Mills. Elizabeth Mills was the granddaughter of Alice Sewell, who is the sister of Richmond's wife Beatrice Sewell. It was then that I learned about Richmond's two children, Isabella and William.

Richmond's daughter Isabella was born on 15 September 1909, the same day as Nivedita's mother's passing. This is why she was named after Nivedita's mother. Isabella died in 2001, but not without leaving behind a priceless collection of memorabilia related to Sister Nivedita. When Barbara Foxe compiled the biography of Sister Nivedita, Isabella had aided her in the process. At last through Elizabeth Mills I had found the daughter of Isabella, Selenda. The striking resemblance of her facial features with that of Sister Nivedita's bewildered me! When I spoke to her on the phone I had a strange feeling that I was talking to Sister Nivedita herself. Although it is only Selenda's middle name, I prefer calling her Margo which she relishes, herself being a follower of Sister Nivedita. If she ever visits India, it is my wish that she be called Margo by Indians. Selenda tells me stories of her mother's favourite memories of Sister Nivedita. For instance, Richmond was gifted a hexagonal ivory table for his marriage by an Indian king. Selenda's mother Isabella's childhood was engraved on all six corners of that table, says Selenda. Jagadish Chandra Bose happened to be a family friend of the Nobles and the children fondly addressed him



*Richmond's Daughter, Isabella (1986)*

as Uncle Bose. Bose had no children of his own and loved Isabella like his own, a memory that Isabella's daughter Selenda still cherishes after so many years. Not only did the gifts by Jagadish Bose and Sarah Bull remain in the house, but so did a tea set intricately carved with the images of Hindu deities, some brass bowls, and a few rare pieces of jewellery. Among the artefacts is a statuette of the Virgin Mary that Nivedita had presented to her brother, and even though Selenda's grandfather Richmond was an atheist, he preserved this token of love from his sister throughout his life with all his heart. Here is an excerpt of a letter from Selenda:

From the time I was a little girl, my mother told me the story of her aunt, Sister Nivedita. I was entranced with the idea that she had left her family in England, changed her religion, and travelled to India to found a school that would help young women. Even though my great



Isabella's Daughter, Selenda

aunt had died thirty years before I was born and when my mother was only a toddler, I always felt a special connection with her for I was named after her. My middle name is Margot, the name that Sister Nivedita's family called her at home. As I grew older and began to read, I decoded the titles of the books on my parents' bookshelves. Among my father's history books and my mother's novels, a special collection stood out. *The Master As I Saw Him* and *The Web of Indian Life* were the most memorable titles, but it would be several years before I was old enough to take these books down for myself and peruse them. My home today reflects many influences left to me by my great aunt, Sister Nivedita. Some items are from her directly and some were given to my grandparents by her friends—several items from Sir Jagadish Bose and Sara Bull—and acquaintances. The bookshelf is filled with her books as well as two biographies. Brass finger bowls and ornaments from India are scattered throughout the house. A special silver tea set embossed with

Hindu deities and animals is used on special occasions. A large dark wooden Welsh dresser spans one wall in the living room, a purchase my great aunt made as a gift to her mother before she left England. Another gift she made was to her brother, my grandfather Richmond Noble. It is a white chine copy of the Virgin Mary's head fashioned after Michelangelo's Pieta. My grandfather claimed to be an agnostic—despite, or more likely because of his intensely religious upbringing by his Irish grandparents—yet because the Pieta was a piece of wonderful art, he cherished it. He also cherished it because it was given to him by his favourite sister who helped bring him up. He adored her. Because of his adoration and respect for his older sister, her life story has been passed down in our family, but it is because of Sister Nivedita herself that her spirit lives so strongly today.

When asked, Selenda, a teacher herself, expressed a desire to visit India and her grandmother Nivedita's old establishment. Also on her wish list were Darjeeling where Nivedita resided with Uncle Bose's family for some time, Nivedita's home in Bose Para Lane, Bose's home, and the residence of the Seviars in Mayavati. Though she suffers from Parkinson's disease, Selenda remains active in her retirement, dividing her time between working at the community library, showcasing her culinary skills at summer fairs, and spending precious time with her grandchildren. In her collection of family memorabilia can be found letters written by Nivedita and Richmond. Her mind wanders once again into the distant past and as I touch her hand, we are both certain that her bond with India will be restored.

Nick Noble, son of William Noble and grandson of Richmond Noble, is a tax consultant by profession. He was kind enough to reply to my email and wrote in glorious detail about Nivedita's meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, infused with his respect and fascination. Gandhi





*Richmond's Son, Nivedita's Nephew  
William with his Maternal Grandmother*

is a renowned figure in the west, but at the time of their meeting Gandhi was not the Gandhi we know of today. Nick's mother is more than ninety years today and her memory is fragile, just like the crumbling photos.

### ***The Children of May Wilson, Nivedita's Sister***

A brief obituary had appeared in the North Devon Journal on 17 October 1912, reporting that Margaret Noble had been cremated and laid to rest. The daughter of Reverend Samuel, she had worked with India's underprivileged her entire life and was known as Sister Nivedita among the Hindus. As a result she was cremated according to Hindu rites and her ashes transported to England, received by her sister May Wilson. Who had sent the urn containing her remains is unknown though. It may have been Jagadish

Chandra Bose, for he was close to the Nobles. Perhaps May had shed many a tear on receiving the urn, and perhaps it was just another overcast day in England. All could be revealed from unpublished family documents and diaries.

Nivedita would lovingly call her younger sister Nim, Mary, or simply May. They were more like friends than sisters, and had grown up sharing their joys and sorrows. After the untimely death of their father and unable to deal with the poverty that ensued, the sisters were sent to an orphanage while brother Richmond lived with their grandparents. In these circumstances the girls clung to each other for support, as told by a grandson Chris Orpen. Chris Orpen is a wonderful and generous person, whom I sought with Selenda's aid. Within a year of marriage, May gave birth to a daughter and named her Margaret Bose Wilson, after Nivedita and

*Sister Nivedita's Mother with May's Daughter in 1908*



### AN INDIAN LADY MISSIONARY IN LONDON.

Sister Nivedita, of the Order of Ramakrishna, of Calcutta, is at present in London on a lecturing mission. She appears in lecture halls and drawing-rooms wearing the garb of her order—a society of wandering friars, men and women who devote themselves to the interests of the very poor. Her object is to remove misconceptions as to the religious thought of India, and she addresses herself especially to vindicating the Hindoo character from the charge of untruthfulness made against it. The appearance of untruthfulness, she points out, is really only the Oriental counterpart of the "conventional falsehood" of European social life, having exactly the same object—to make the wheels of everyday life move more smoothly. On the other hand, she maintains that the pursuit of truth in all its great and essential aspects is revered and practised among the Indian peoples. The so-called idolatry she explains as innocent and even helpful symbolism. Sister Nivedita has on several occasions had the advantage of having as chairman the scholarly Professor Ramesh Dutt, now lecturing upon questions of Indian philosophy at University College. Sister Nivedita is known to her English friends as Miss Noble.

*Snippet from The Leeds Mercury dated 8 Nov 1900*

*Source: British Newspaper Archive*

Jagadish Chandra Bose. The eminent Bengali scientist Bose was a good family friend of the Wilsons. A rare photo has been unearthed of Nivedita's mother with her granddaughter Margaret Bose Wilson taken in 1908. Nivedita's mother passed away in 1909. Another photo discovered by Selenda from May's collection was of a handsome young man, May's maternal grandfather Richmond.

Chris Orpen is the son of Margaret Bose

*Chris Orpen and his wife*



Wilson. In his collection is another rare photo of his grandfather, the electron physicist husband of May Wilson, in the laboratory. Visible on the wall behind him are framed pictures of three eminent scientists—Thomas Alva Edison who had invented electricity, Marconi, while the third frame was mysteriously empty displaying a question mark. It is Chris's belief that the answer lay in the middle name of Wilson's daughter, Bose. Bose may not have won the coveted Nobel prize, but that did not deter Ernest Wilson, Nivedita's brother-in-law, from being one of his greatest admirers.

May's son Chris wishes to travel to India, although his son has already made several journeys

LAST Saturday the cremated remains of Miss Margaret Noble were interred in the family grave of the Nobles in Torrington Cemetery. The deceased lady was the daughter of the late Rev. Samuel R. Noble, who ministered to the Hows Church in 1876-77. Miss Noble spent her life in work among the natives in India. She was known among the Hindus as The Sister Nivedita, and had quite a remarkable influence over the natives. After cremation, the remains were sent to England for interment; they were received by Mrs. Wilson (sister) and Mr. Wilson, and conveyed to the Cemetery. The Rev. E. Bernstein officiated at the burial. There were also present the following Torrington friends:—Mr. G. M. Doe, Mr. W. C. Medland, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Eastmond.

*Snippet from North Devon Journal dated 17 October 1912,*

*Source: British Newspaper Archive*

including a stopover at Kolkata. However this adventurous young man was unaware of Nivedita and her magnanimous work until recently. Both father and son now want to visit the Ramakrishna Mission and re-acquaint themselves with their past and Nivedita. We hope we are able to extend our love and warmth to them, so that they may visit all the places graced by Nivedita during her lifetime in India.

CB

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# Experiencing a Seminar

Sarbasri Goswami

WHEN I WAS BUSY making arrangements for Narayana Puja, an unknown voice on the phone put forward this question to me: ‘Can you conduct a seminar for us?’ ‘Can you please call later?’, I said as I was not in a position to accept the invitation right at that moment. The second phone call, however had a different request—‘I am sorry we have already arranged for conducting the seminar, can you summarize the entire programme?’ I hesitated, then on second thoughts, accepted.

When I stepped inside the auditorium on the scheduled day,<sup>1</sup> I did not think that the day’s event would provide an experience for which I was not at all prepared. The seminar was on ‘Gender and Spirituality’. Coming to think of gender, it is really a source of great shame to witness the crude gender bias in a country where the revered rishis of the Upanishads considered human beings as *amritasya putra*, children of immortality. It is a place where the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and also Sister Nivedita did their best to provide mass education, and of course, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda never had any ‘gender segregation’ in their teachings. It is really a pity that even today, in a world where science and technology seems to have reached its zenith, women are looked upon as commodities and seminars have to be organized to make society conscious and sensitive to gender bias. Since we are not born with this consciousness, it needs to be cultivated.

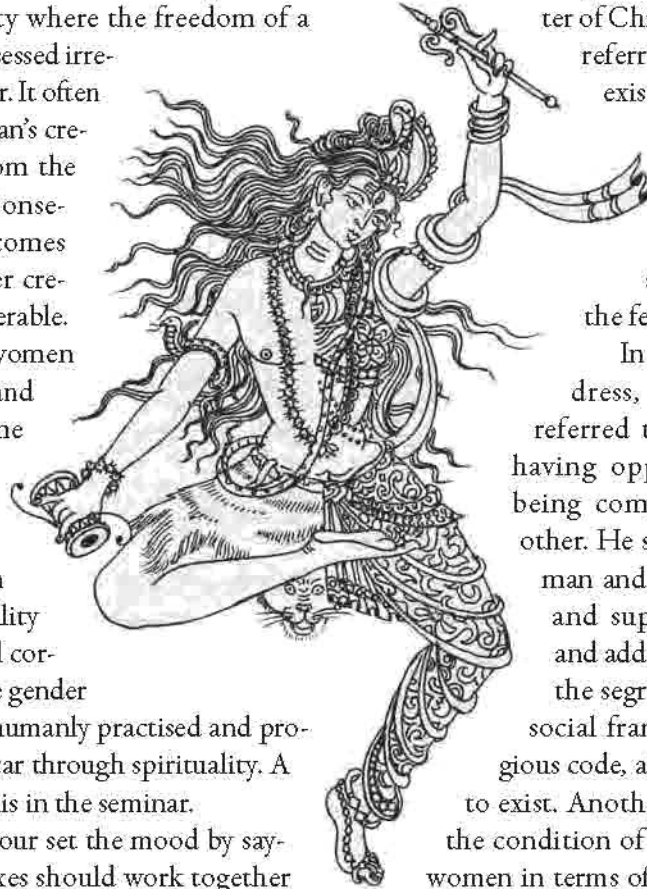
Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda propagated a change of attitude towards the

opposite sex for we are all children of God. When Sri Sarada Devi said that she was the mother of both the good and the wicked, she also meant that all are her children; there is no basic segregation, so to say. However, the discussion of the seminar tried to focus on spirituality irrespective of any religious code. Spirituality has nothing to do with religion; it is all about not being materialistic. We need to see a person as a spiritual person irrespective of religious beliefs. Spirituality must be made a tool to counter gender discrimination. There should be a reconsidering of spirituality in a different perspective, one that provides a holistic approach towards a person’s identity.

When we see a person, we see a man, woman, or a transgender. But are these the only identities of human beings? Gender identity always leads to gender trouble. Swami Vivekananda has said, ‘Is woman a name to be coupled with the physical body only?’<sup>2</sup> So, when we talk about women with respect to society, culture, and empowerment, we must keep in mind that empowerment must be made effective. Therefore, education comes before empowerment. It is taking decisions and implementing them. Even when women living in cities realize that they cannot take decisions—that is where empowerment comes in. Sheela Rani Chunkath provided a sterling example of true women empowerment, when as a collector of the Pudukkottai district in Tamilnadu, India, she gave a bicycle to every woman who learnt to sign her name, that being the yardstick of her having become literate.

Why cannot a woman remain unmarried? It should be her choice. I quote Swami Vivekananda: 'Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and marriage and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others' (4.367-68). Here we come to the question of freedom of expression, freedom of creativity where the freedom of a woman should be assessed irrespective of her gender. It often happens that a woman's creativity is judged from the male perspective. Consequently, a woman comes under attack and her creativity becomes vulnerable. That is why, some women writers, filmmakers, and actors had to become activists. Therefore, there is a dire need for cultural transformation and with this sensibility let us reach out to all corners of society where gender discrimination is inhumanly practised and provide solace to that scar through spirituality. A lot was said about this in the seminar.

The guest of honour set the mood by saying that both the sexes should work together without antagonism. The first speaker spoke of empowerment as a continuous process at two levels, in terms of legislation as well as consciousness. She referred to the glorious days of women at the time of Maitreyi and Gargi. She pointed to the power that comes from within apart from legislation, which is a higher aspiration and ranges from the *annamaya kosha*, the physical sheath, to the *anandamaya kosha*, to



the sheath of bliss. The next speaker, through her slideshow presentation stressed on the position of women in society, women in search of their identity, where women are looked at in terms of certain social norms and not as co-workers. There are binding norms even regarding dress as Rabindranath has mentioned through the mouth of the character of Chitrangada. The speaker referred to the conditional existence of women in society and stressed that there should be reconciliation from both the sides, the male and the female.

In his presidential address, the president aptly referred to Shiva and Vishnu having opposite qualities but being complementary to each other. He stressed that similarly, man and woman complement and supplement each other and added that if we take away the segregation caused by the social framework and the religious code, all contradictions cease to exist. Another speaker referred to the condition of the mental health of women in terms of philosophy and concluded that spirituality empowers mental growth. A law student discussed how law ought to be and pointed out the defects of law as practised today, which has only led to gender segregation. She stressed the need for legislation that will protect human rights and treat both men and women as human beings without any special leanings towards gender.


An English professor said that though we

depend on spirituality, it sometimes leads to intellectual contradictions. She related her personal experiences and tried to correlate them with scriptures and other real-life situations. The next speaker dealt with the serious problems of gender and freedom of expression in a given social framework. She pointed out the importance of the divinity of soul taught by Swami Vivekananda. Another delegate expressed her opinion on freedom of expression and citizenship of women and how a woman's life is more prone to public ridicule than that of a man. The special guest concluded by throwing light on the idea of one spiritual source, Brahman, which is the main source of consciousness and divinity. One has to uplift oneself and remove the obstacles that prevent human beings from manifesting their divinity.

In the question-answer session I learnt that Swami Vivekananda was against any kind of institutionalism, that gender is a constructed idea, and believed that empowerment should be both at the pragmatic level and beyond. We also learnt how mental peace is related to spirituality and how that helps build the personality of a human being and that the reservation policy for women apparently seems discriminatory but it only answers back to marginalization. We came to the conclusion that we need to fight for human rights by conglomerating law and human rights for all—man, woman, and transgender.

I conclude by quoting a review of Riane Eisler's book 'The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future': 'Our ancestors were peaceful, highly artistic, compassionate people who loved and celebrated all Life and worshipped the Goddess. The remains of their cities prove that they lived communally with no slaves and no signs of war for 2000 years until the cruel, bloody invasions of the peripheral, nomadic Indo-Europeans. Our "civilization" has ever after been based on the Dominator

model: a history filled with wars, slavery, murder, rape, violence; men dominating women, children, and other men; in which values of compassion and peace are set aside or suppressed. ... Eisler brings up new points for discussion, speaking directly to the Soul about our history and the Present. And from the Truth of our Prehistoric past, when people were developing a truly peaceful and egalitarian society, we definitely can make this a reality for our future. This can be a world in which every Person is truly Free and Equal, a world without war or violence, in which the Arts flourish, creativity has no bounds, and we live at peace with all of Nature and ourselves: the power of creativity and love—symbolized by the sacred Chalice, the holy vessel of life—is the governing principle.'<sup>3</sup>

The seminar on 'Gender and Spirituality' seemed to be a torchbearer to work against all gender discrimination while remembering Swamiji's words—'whatever we shall be in the future will be the result of what we do or think now'.<sup>4</sup> Let us depend on the principle of three Cs—consideration, cooperation, and coordination, and bring about a spiritual regeneration to make this world a better place. The next time we encounter a person, we must consider the person more a spiritual being than a man, woman, or transgender. 

## References

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# *The Practice of Devotion*

**Swami Pavitrananda**

**W**HEN WE SPEAK OF DEVOTION to God, naturally we may ask, 'Who is God? Where is he? We have not seen him. We have not known him. How can we have devotion to God?' These are reasonable questions. But the difficulty is that it is doubtful whether anybody can describe God. We do not start religious life that way. It is not that with a map and a chart we have located God, and we start on our spiritual journey. We cannot proceed that way, nor do we know what God is. We cannot describe what God is.

## **Knowing God**

All philosophical speculations come to naught. Philosophers will describe God in this way and that. Their descriptions are meaningless. They are simply intellectual gymnastics, argument after argument. One will try to prove that God exists; another will try to disprove it. One will say, 'God is of this nature.' Another will say, 'God's nature is different.' These things lead us nowhere.

There is a beautiful Bengali song: 'Who can know thee, O Lord, unless thou revealest thyself to him? All the scriptures, all the Vedas are at a loss to describe thee.'

In the metaphysical books of Vedanta, it is said with great boldness, 'Even the Vedas are in the domain of maya.' When I read this, I was startled at such boldness. Even the very Vedas are within the domain of ignorance—ignorance in the sense that they try to make a description of the ultimate reality in human language, in philosophical words. They cannot do that, though they

can give us some guidance in our search for him.

So we cannot start by having the knowledge of what God is, or even whether it is worth our struggle to seek him. When we say, 'Who is God? What is God', we are cautious that our struggle shall not be in vain. We demand to know what our destiny is, and then we shall cultivate devotion to God. We cannot proceed in this 'arithmetical' fashion, as with worldly wisdom. Devotion does not come in that way for anyone.

Our idea of God springs within our heart; one cannot say why and how it springs. We instinctively, intuitively, feel something, and that starts devotion towards God. So, take it for granted, it is certain we cannot know God in the beginning. If we have some feeling that there is a God, that there is someone who holds the 'string' of this universe, that is enough. With that we may start our religious life.

In considering devotion to God, we find three classes of persons. In the first class are people who intuitively love God. Even while they are children, some persons are religious-minded. In India, such children take to worship instinctively. We cannot explain how it happens—perhaps they have seen their mother or other relatives doing these things. We read of the lives of some mystics or saints—that they could not go to school, for they thought schooling was useless. Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, told his teacher when he was sent to school, 'Why do you create this confusion in my mind? Tell me of Rama, tell me of God.' He started life that way, though we cannot explain why.

Religious feeling, in spite of whatever we may say, is strong within the human heart. It is a constitutional necessity of human beings; it is there. No one knows when it will assert itself. It cannot be suppressed, for the more you try to suppress it, the more it will grow.

History indicates that whenever there has been an attempt to suppress religious feeling, it has only become stronger. In Indian history we find that during the Mughal rule, a tyrannical Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb tried to suppress Hinduism and within a few years the Mughal empire fell. But Akbar, of an earlier Mughal reign, tried to establish harmony of religions. He had faith in and sympathy for all religions, and his empire was prosperous. So when we find that certain governments or certain rulers want to suppress religion, know it for certain, religion will assert itself and become stronger, because it is a constitutional necessity of man. It is within him; by suppression you only bring it out more strongly.

### **The Story of Prahlada**

In Indian mythology we find a nice story of how a father failed to suppress the religious spirit of his son. Prahlada was the boy's name. Prahlada is considered one of the greatest devotees. It is a mythological story after all, but behind the story there is a great meaning. Prahlada's father Hiranyakashipu was the king of demons. *Daitya* is the word; I translate it as 'demon' not finding a more appropriate word, but actually demon is not quite the conception. Prahlada's father waged war against the gods. He routed the gods out of the heavenly kingdom, and took possession of the heavenly world. He wanted no one to utter the name of God.

Prahlada was born to him. The father was cautious that he should not have any religious spirit in him. He engaged two special teachers to teach him in such a way that he might not have

any religious feeling. And Hiranyakashipu, you can understand, was a tyrannical king, a dictator, and totalitarian in his methods. Not one, but two teachers were engaged. And when the teachers began to teach him, the boy began to teach other children of his age things about devotion to God. The teachers became alarmed. They knew a great danger was in store for him if this child continued to behave in that way. Having no other recourse, the teachers came to Prahlada's father and reported how the boy was behaving. The father tried to persuade his son not to persist in the way he was behaving, but failed. He threatened him and afterwards began to persecute him.

The story goes that Hiranyakashipu asked some persons to throw pointed weapons at Prahlada to frighten him. When the weapons touched him, the boy was so full of the thought of God that he did not feel any pain. The father became exasperated. He then contrived to have a wild elephant trample Prahlada underfoot. But the elephant could never hurt him, no more than he could hurt a block of iron. As every attempt failed, the father became more exasperated. He threw the boy from a high precipice into the abyss below, and Prahlada fell; it is said, at the bottom of the abyss just like flowers falling on a bed of grass, unharmed. After this, Hiranyakashipu tied him with some venomous serpents and rocks, and threw him onto the bed of the ocean. But there the boy was uttering the name of God.

There is a prayer that God is everywhere. God is in the water. God is in the land, God is everywhere. And as the boy Prahlada was saying that prayer, it was not simply a prayer of words. From his heart, from within him came this prayer, and he felt that there is God everywhere. The snakes lost their venomous instinct, and he came out on the surface of the water.

The father, becoming more exasperated, began to threaten him that some more severe punishment would be given to him. And Prahlada said, 'God is everywhere. God is omnipresent, God is omnipotent.' And his father said, 'Is your God everywhere? And then is he in this pillar?' 'Yes, God is everywhere,' said Prahlada. Then his father, in great rage, kicked the pillar, just to show that God was not there. It was broken to pieces. But the story goes that God came from that shattered pillar in the form of Narasimha, half lion, half man, who killed the father and began to caress the boy. And God asked him, 'Just pray for any boon. I will give it to you.' And it is said that the boy uttered these words: 'That intensity of love which ignorant people have for the fleeting things of the world, may that intensity of love be in me, but only directed to Thee, O Lord.' He wanted simply to have devotion to God. Though it is mythological, this story has a great meaning behind it. Whenever you try to suppress the religious feeling, it comes out more permanently.

### **Different Types of Devotion**

Some persons have a natural, inborn religious instinct. We do not know why it is so. Sri Ramakrishna used to say with regard to some of his disciples, 'There is a class of devotees, the *nityasiddhas*, the ever-perfect. From their very birth they seek God. They do not enjoy anything of the world.' 'They are never entangled in the world. When they grow a little older they feel the awakening of inner consciousness and go directly toward God.' There is a thin veneer of ignorance. It is taken off very easily. They were free always; they came into the world, were born with a great devotion towards God. They do not touch the sordid things of the world, but remain untainted.

So this is one class of persons. And its opposite is a class of person who ridicule everything

religious. They do not care for religion or religious feeling. If they find a saint by chance, they will criticize him. They will have the audacity to persecute a saint, when even in their dying moments their worldly attachments will be so strong that they will feel only their own pain of leaving the world. They are just the opposite of the saintly class.

And in the middle is the class of people who suffer most. They are not like those who are fortunate enough not to care for religion—'fortunate' enough in the sense that religious things do not trouble their minds. Those who have no idealism are satisfied with the gross things of the world—earning money and living a life of the senses. They are satisfied, and do not care for anything else; they have no other, higher yearning. But it has been said that it is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. So, 'worldly' persons are fortunate, or unfortunate, depending upon one's point of view, and they go in their own way.

The trouble arises with persons in whom there has been some awakening of religious spirit. They think whether God is real, and how to get devotion to God. For them there is trouble. This is the case of a Socrates dissatisfied. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'If you have no ideal to guide you, you are simply a brute.' A thousand times unhappier is the lot of those who care for some ideal, who want to realize something, and who have the courage and the boldness to want to go up the stream. Not that they exhibit a sense of egotism, but their nature is that they want to go up the stream, no matter how difficult it may be.

This poem of Kabir, another saint who transcended religious boundaries, is very beautiful:

*Sukhiya sab sansar hai, khaye aur soye;  
Dukhiya daas Kabir hai, jage aur roye.*

The world is so happy, they eat and sleep;  
Kabir is so sad, he keeps awake and weeps.



Kabir could say such things because his spiritual yearning was very intense, so much so that afterwards he became a saint. Some of his poems, you will find are very beautiful, full of the joy he attained.

All those who have higher yearnings must pass through long periods of struggle. They willingly and deliberately face the struggle. Now what do they do? How is their religious life built up when there is an awakening in them? Fortunate are those persons who come into contact with those with whom religion is not a matter of discussion, not even a matter of striving, but a matter of realization. There are persons with whom God is a reality, who have known God, who have known the ultimate reality. It is a simple challenge. If you talk so much of God, why should you be satisfied unless and until you have realized him? Until then, how can you be satisfied?

So, if you come into contact with one who has known God, you are fortunate, for you can no longer have any disbelief. You see the light. You see that it is possible to know God. In the darkness of the night you may speculate that there will not come any day at all. But when the sun comes out you can never think that there is darkness in the world. You may say that God does not exist, and that religion is not true. But if you come into contact with a person for whom religion is a reality, it will be hard for you to resist him. Spontaneously you will surrender yourself to the influence of such a person.

### **Types of People Who Met Sri Ramakrishna**

Many persons came to Sri Ramakrishna. One was a great scholar, who had studied Sanskrit



*Mirabai Temple, the Place where Mirabai Stayed in Vrindavan*

scriptures very well. And after he saw Sri Ramakrishna during his first visit, he said that what he could not learn by his study for so many years he had learnt by sitting before Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna had no knowledge of scriptures in the scholarly sense, but people could not resist him. I illustrate this with other examples, because they are so typical of the reactions of people to Sri Ramakrishna, and it happened 'just the other day', so to speak. There would come to him politicians, who usually did not care for religion. There would come to him many persons who were not quite enamoured of religion, or of the religious life, or of God. But the more they came into contact with him, the more their lives changed. In them there would come the religious yearning.

There came a doctor to Sri Ramakrishna, during his last illness. Later, I read that this doctor was addressing Sri Ramakrishna as *tumi*, not very respectfully, and I asked a senior swami of our Order, 'How could he address Sri Ramakrishna in that way?' You see, in Bengali when people converse, there are three expressions. There is the respectful expression, which means *apni*, and there is the semi-respectful *tumi*, which one says to

equals or to inferior persons. To those whom one loves very much, children, or very dear friends, one says *tui*, which is something like 'thou'. So, I wondered how this doctor could have used *tumi* in addressing Sri Ramakrishna. And the swami answered me, 'Well, you see, after all Sri Ramakrishna was a priest, getting two dollars a month pay, and this man was a renowned doctor.'

Usually such people addressed Sri Ramakrishna in the semi-respectful way. This doctor did not believe in religion or anything mystical, but the more he came into contact with Sri Ramakrishna, the more he was enchanted by him. He would prescribe, because of Sri Ramakrishna's throat ailment that 'No one should be allowed to talk with you.' But he himself would then spend a long time talking with him. He was fortunate, because he had come into contact with a person in whom there was the realization, not mere religious striving. Sri Ramakrishna had reached the end of his striving; with him it was realization. And when the doctor came into contact with him he was at once under the spell of his influence.

You see a blazing light, you see a mine of joy, and you are caught into it. It is a fact. So all these ideas that there is no God, there is no religious feeling, are simply skin deep in one sense. You do not know what you are. You do not know what your feelings are. You can be transformed at once, by a touch, or by a glance. Swami Vivekananda said, 'Prophets preach, but the Incarnations like Jesus, Buddha, Ramakrishna, can give religion; one glance, one touch is enough. That is the power of the Holy Ghost, the "laying on of hands"; the power was actually transmitted to the disciples by the Master—the "chain of Guru-power". That, the real baptism, has been handed down for untold ages.' These things happen. You cannot deny the facts. Fortunate are those persons who come into contact with such spiritual personalities.

But all are not so blessed. All cannot come into contact with them; it is not their opportunity. The nearest thing to that is to come into contact with persons in whom there is sincere striving to reach the goal of God realization. For them, the doubting spirit is gone. There is no uncertainty in them. They are striving, and when you come into contact with them you are caught in their atmosphere. You are caught in the sweep of their influence, because in them there is a genuine struggle, a sincere striving. If you cannot come into contact with such persons, you are left to your own resources.

### ***The Stages of Devotion***

You have to study the scriptures. If there is a little religious instinct you will automatically feel interested in studying scriptures, and studying the lives of saints. Thereby also, your religious spirit grows. Then you will be challenged to consider whether or not the scriptures are true. If they are true, what do you have for yourself? If you think earnestly in that way, your religious spirit will grow. A desire for the practice of devotion to God will arise. But as we begin to practise devotion, there come three stages.

At first, there is great enthusiasm, which is the enthusiasm of first love. Then comes a period of dryness. You cannot fully trust your first enthusiasm always. In India, when the religious spirit of some people is aroused, soon they get ideas—they become wandering monks, they will try to go to the Himalayas. So they go, suffer for some days, and then come back home.

Some persons have suffered from some mishap, and then they develop a religious spirit, go away from home in search of religion and suffering for a week, turn back home dejected. So there comes the first enthusiasm, but you cannot always trust that first enthusiasm. There comes a period of 'dryness'; it is bound to come. It has

come in the lives of all the saints, this 'dark night of the soul'. Your faith is thereby tested. Nothing worth having can be had without giving the fullest price for it. So there comes the period of dryness, a period of hopes and fears.

It is not all dryness. Sometimes you get a glimpse, but you are not sure whether the dryness or the joy of that faint glimpse is the greater. One has to pass through that stage. Ordinary human beings have to struggle, not those persons who, as Sri Ramakrishna said, are born with a religious feeling.

Many persons cannot stand the period of struggle. They will say that they do not get any result. They are disappointed. They will attend Vedanta classes for some time, and if they do not get any results, they are dissatisfied. Religious life is not pursued that way. You are tested; it is certain that there will come a period of dryness. I say these things deliberately. If you know that everyone has to pass through that stage, you will not be so much alarmed to find yourself in it. You will not be so despondent. You will have the courage to stand the struggle.

Then, after that struggle, comes joy, real joy. Then you are safe. When you sink a well, sometimes you get some water, though you have not touched the real spring of water. And you do not know when this well will dry up, and the water will become muddy. But once you have gone to a real spring, you are sure you will have a perennial source of water.

So when you experience real joy after a period of struggle, after a period of dryness, then you enjoy safety, you have simply to enjoy life. When you go in a boat, you have to struggle to come to the midstream. When you have come to the midstream, the current will take you along; you will not have to struggle so much. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'One must be up and doing in the beginning. After that one need not work hard.

The helmsman stands up and clutches the rudder firmly as long as the boat is passing through waves, storms, high wind, or around the curves of a river; but he relaxes after steering through them. As soon as the boat passes the curves and the helmsman feels a favourable wind, he sits comfortably and just touches the rudder. Next he prepares to unfurl the sail and gets ready for a smoke.' 'Don't sit idle simply because your spiritual consciousness has been awakened a little. Go forward. Beyond the forest of sandalwood there are other and more valuable things—silver-mines, gold-mines, and so on.' You have to continue, making a continuous struggle; then you are sure to reach the highest goal. You will have real devotion.

But there is one interesting thing. The 'treasure' is there. We have only to discover it. When we know that we have simply to discover it, then we get much greater strength for our struggle. We know it is the inheritance of every human being. We have simply to assert ourselves to get it. It requires simply a little struggle. God is playing hide and seek with us, as the devotees will say, but the goal is there. You will find it.

### **Qualifications for Devotion**

For the struggle to attain real devotion, some requisite qualifications are necessary, just as for any other undertaking. If, for example, you want to find joy in work and if you want to grow through work, you must not have a spirit of competition. These are fundamental laws; you must not have any sense of pride in you, you must not have any spirit of competition or rivalry, and you must be helpful to all. These three things will enable you to find joy in work. If you go in a spirit of competition, at once you court misery and mental disturbance.

Also, for the practice of devotion one has to be cautious about the three laws of work. We

may not at once eradicate our failures to live up to them, but if we know what the pitfalls are, it gives us great help. Further, for the practice of devotion, there must be purity of heart—inner and outward purity. Then, you must have love for one and all—no malice towards anyone. You must have the spirit of perseverance and steadfastness. For, you know it is in the very nature of things that you will have to pass through struggles.

The struggle will be minimized if you come into contact with persons who have known God, because then you know that the goal is certain to be achieved. It gives you great strength. Otherwise you will have to struggle harder, though this does not mean it will always be a dreary struggle. There will be joys in the struggle and if you come to feel that you are really helpless, if you feel exhausted by your struggle, help is sure to come. God helps those who are really helpless. You must understand that you will have to pass through a stage of helplessness. Then you need steadfastness and you must not give way to despondency.

Again, you cannot trust fully your initial enthusiasm, expecting that the result will come at once. A professor was telling me at Belur Math—I had come from Mayavati, our Himalayan centre—‘If only I was able to stay in Mayavati for three years, I would realize God.’ I smiled; I did not like to disturb him. Afterwards he had become a monk. I do not know what he would say now. So goes this first enthusiasm, that if you go to a good atmosphere you will at once realize the truth. You may get some help, but the real help comes from within.

### **Real Devotion**

What happens when you have real devotion? What is the definition of real devotion? Here you see we have to go by the experience of persons who have real devotion; otherwise we shall

simply be speculating. And how shall we know that their experiences are true, and are not fake? Here, those persons who struggle, those persons who are on the religious path can instinctively tell which are true, and which are untrue. They describe real devotion as extreme love of God. What is real love? Real love is not a bartering system. You do not expect anything in return. You do not pray to God for worldly success or even for the welfare of your children. You leave everything to God. So it is extreme love. Ordinarily, we do not feel this kind of love; we always want something in return. But real devotion does not expect anything in return. Why should you ask anything when you have touched the mine of gold, when you have touched the mine of joy, the source of all beings, of all existence? Why should you ask for anything? Don't you think that all are safe in God's hands? If you have any love for him, can't you believe that everything is safe in his hands? In our ignorance we become worried and anxious about things; it means we do not have real devotion to God.

And what happens when a person has that extreme love of God? He has found a great joy within him, and he is satisfied with that. Outwardly, you would think that he is a person who does not care for anything. But he has got something within him. He is bewildered in that great joy. We are bewildered when unexpectedly we get something very precious. It is reported that in gambling, when one wins a big sum of money, sometimes that person dies instantaneously, so shocked is he at getting such a large sum of money, far beyond his fondest expectations.

So also, those who have extreme love of God become full of joy, almost bewildered. And when they have that joy, that joy changes, remains with them day and night; in whatever they do, in all their duties; there is that undercurrent of joy. All their work is dedicated to the Lord. And even

one moment of separation from God seems to be a great misery.

Now, is it possible to get such devotion? The scriptures say and the history of religions show that this devotion can be found in certain fortunate persons. The history of religions indicates that there are some persons who have experienced that joy, whose mode of life is quite different from the worldly life, because they have found that great joy. For them the value of the things of the world has altogether gone. Once Sri Ramakrishna had a desire to wear a shawl, a costly shawl. In his own words: 'Once I had the desire to put on a gold-embroidered robe, wear a ring on my finger, and smoke a hubble-bubble with a long pipe. Mathur Babu procured all these things for me. I wore the gold-embroidered robe and said to myself after a while, "Mind! This is what is called a gold-embroidered robe." Then I took it off and threw it away. I couldn't stand the robe any more. Again I said to myself, "Mind! This is called a shawl, and this a ring, and this, smoking a hubble-bubble with a long pipe." I threw those things away once for all, and the desire to enjoy them never arose in my mind again.' He spat upon it and threw it away. Outwardly, it would appear to a bystander that he was behaving like a madman. But was he not the most sane? He asked why one should care so much for a costly shawl, if he possessed that which rendered all such things valueless by comparison. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'This world is a huge lunatic asylum where all men are mad, some after money, some after women, some after name or fame, and a few after God.'

### **Saints as Examples**

History shows that irreligious acts are sometimes done in the name of religion. We always quote these things. But what is more important; misguided religion as manifest in certain persons, or

the realization and devotion of saints?

If you would follow saints, the scriptures say that struggle is necessary. This struggle is not in your spiritual practice so much as in the testing of your devotion. When you withstand the test, real devotion comes, through the blessings of men of God, or through the grace of God. When we struggle, we get exhausted, and we feel that we are nothing; the struggle is necessary just to show that we are nothing, just to show that our struggles are in vain, and then grace comes.

When we struggle, we feel proud that we have done spiritual practices so many times; we have done devotional practices for so many hours. Where is God? We feel that as a matter of right we shall have him. We feel that we have paid such a price, why should we not get the commodity. You are tested that way. The struggle is just to show that you are zero. When you feel exhausted, then the truth comes.

And in that struggle, what sustains you? The example of the saints who have known God alone sustains you. Their example gives you strength and sustenance; this is their blessing. As you follow them you become exhausted and the grace of God comes. His grace is always ready to come, if you feel that you are nothing. But it is not possible with us in our present state. We have to pass through this drill and drudgery and the 'dark night of the soul', just to feel that we are nothing.

Anything on which you put any value has no true value. The last thing we value is that by our spiritual practice, by our spiritual 'gymnastics', we shall realize God. It is just the opposite. That feeling springs from egotism and false pride. That must be exhausted, in order that devotion may come, mainly through the blessings of saints and the grace of the Lord. And in the meantime, you have to pass through the struggle, just to know that all depends on the Lord. ❧

# Religious Dimensions of Karl Popper's Philosophy

Joe E Barnhart

(Continued from the previous issue)

FORTUNATELY, A GROWING NUMBER of biblical scholars who have learned the value of historical criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism have come to appreciate the value of turning to sociology and other social sciences to help them better probe into the religious texts and documents, which, after all, reflect the lives of fellow contestants in their social, economic, and political settings. The social sciences can also contribute significantly to the scholarly exegesis of religious scriptures by investigating the ways a culture's *Weltanschauung* functions in the communal life and the life of individual members of the given community. By discipline and imagination, social

scientists can sometimes explore more precisely the ways the various elements of a *Weltanschauung* function to help shape individual and communal behaviour. Popper's telling critique of positivism's dismissal of all metaphysics helps pave the way for social scientists to show how beliefs, images, stories, myths, and doctrines have affected human lives and entire societies despite the hard fact that many of those beliefs very likely could not be tested. Indeed, literary criticism and the social sciences may by working together demonstrate that the species has often used some of its most powerful parables and legends to enrich their lives, although some myths appear as degrading as uplifting. I wish, then, to suggest that a strictly naturalistic interpretation of Paul's thesis of 'justification by faith' could indicate how a researcher might gain insight into a human problem or issue even though the written or oral source of the insight is laden with doctrines regarded as fictional. By using Popper's approach to analyse Paul's epistle to the Romans and the Galatians, scholars might help provide contemporary humans with rich insight for dealing with the guilt-forgiveness-redemption issue. Unless we are sociopaths, we have felt or even suffered guilt, knowing that we have violated what we regard as a just moral code or principle. Even some sociopaths can recognize that *others* sometimes suffer a measure of guilt for violating their code. In a later article, it might be useful to ask if it is possible for



PAINTING: SAINT PAUL AT HIS WRITING DESK. BY REMBRANDT

a sociopath to make a genuine change—to convert into a morally sensitive person. In her book *The Sociopath Next Door*, Martha Stout (b.1953) discusses those who have ‘no primordial attachments to others’ and the antisocial person having ‘only a tenuous relationship with himself’.

At a meeting of the Southern Society of Philosophy and Psychology in the early 1970s in Tennessee, I presented a paper to argue that while the human foetus is human, it is not technically a person until *after* birth. To be a person, I argued, requires also the active and nurturing second or ‘the social womb’. Hartshorne in the audience heard the paper and later said he thoroughly agreed with the paper’s position. In writing the paper, I had drawn heavily from three process philosophers: Karl Popper, E S Brightman, and Charles Hartshorne. I mention this to suggest that the abortion issue need divide theists on one side and naturalists on another. Brightman was one of the major proponents of the philosophy of theistic personalism, but his rich and carefully developed philosophy of personhood is strikingly close to that of Popper and Eccles. Ironically, while Popper does not think there is life after death and Eccles believes there is, Brightman said we now have no way of knowing the answer. I conjecture that Popper’s critique of probability theory would likely lead him to join perhaps David Hume in asking how individuals could know that their life after death is only temporary or is not the last in a *finite* number of reincarnations. Eccles believes in life after death, but if we embrace his truly profound understanding of the emergence of human life on earth, we still must wonder about the meaning of our self-identity after a few thousand years in the next life. Is it immortality, or is it a series of gradual, subtle replacements? In what sense would the Apostle John be John after, say, four thousand years? Or after a mere four hundred years of existence in the next life, who would



Charles Hartshorne

Joseph Stalin really be? Selective memory would, of course, become itself an exceedingly creative adventure. Would the memory products resemble a series of historical novels?

### **Paul and Justification by Faith**

Brian Dodd at the University of Sheffield proficiently defended the long-accepted justification by faith interpretation of Romans 1:17.<sup>1</sup> As a Jew in the first century, Paul was familiar with the ancient practice of sacrificing certain animals as offerings to atone for sin and to win the favour of the deity in war and in times of great need. Nine of the Ten Commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy have directly to do with respecting other individuals and the community bond. The commandment that prohibits taking the Lord’s name in vain or lightly can be viewed as reinforcing truth-telling. It should be unnecessary to invoke the name of the deity to prove the speaker’s truthfulness. In the New Testament the principle is explicit: ‘Let your Yes be Yes, and your No be No.’<sup>2</sup>

Since the moral code helps secure the community’s very structure, to violate even a part of the code is to inflict social harm or damage. It costs the victims pain or loss, sometimes irrevocable

loss. Like some of their polytheistic neighbours, the early Hebrews turned the offering of sacrifices to deity into something of an institution—a sacrificial system with thousands upon thousands of blood sacrifices offered presumably to the deity.

Apparently by the first century this became an increasingly self-serving institution, often at considerable cost to the average member of the community. Prophets like Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah had much earlier come to suspect that the deity's interest in animal sacrifices had been grossly misrepresented. Historians and biblical scholars versed in culturology as expounded by people like Leslie Alvin White (1900–75) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) can fruitfully track down some of the roots of the sacrificial system. Apparently Paul, if we may with reservation accept the report in Acts 17, had arrived at the conjecture that God had no need of anything. This raises pertinent questions that deserve attention: (1) How could Paul bring himself to conclude that the Creator *accepted* Jesus's execution as an *atonement sacrifice* for human sin? This question delves into Paul's thinking process, his presuppositions and logic in his cultural setting, not into the deity's thinking. Social scientists happily forego inquiring into strictly divine preferences. (2) How did Paul become convinced that the Creator had actually *designed* to send Jesus to earth to become the supreme blood atonement? (3) As a Jew acquainted with at least the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, did Paul ignore or override the message of the Genesis story about the angel's preventing Abraham from killing Isaac, who was already bound and ready to be sacrificed on the altar? The message of the Isaac story stands out as a graphic critique of human sacrifice. According to Paul, Jesus was born of a woman and became in his human form, *morphē*, a slave obedient unto death.<sup>3</sup> (4) Did Paul agree with the explicit doctrine in the Epistle to the

Hebrews that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness or remission of sin?<sup>4</sup>

The genuine epistles of Paul leave no doubt that he wished his readers to believe that the ancient sacrificial system of slaughtering animals as propitiation and atonement for sin had been superseded by the final and perfect sacrifice of the crucified Son of God, Jesus Christ. The unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whom many scholars believe was influenced by the Pauline perspective, describes this same saviour as also the ultimate and ideal high priest in the heavenly temple not made by human hands. In this undefiled and perfect temple the saviour serves as the perpetual advocate before the Father on behalf of the human race. Ironically, the general epistles and the authentic Pauline epistles do not seem to contain material drawn from the life of an actual first-century Jesus. There is reference to a crucifixion or death, but hundreds of pious Jews were crucified under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215–164 BCE) and Alexander Jannaeus (126–76 BCE) in generations before the emergence of Christianity. As a Jew, Paul had undoubtedly heard many stories about the crucified martyrs, eight hundred under Jannaeus. Given the training that he claims to have received as a Pharisee, Paul had to know that in the Hebrew religion many deaths have been taken as atoning offerings to God. *In War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* Susan Niditch spells out in grim detail the 'ban', under which all human beings among the defeated were 'devoted to distraction' as an offering to the God Yahweh.

Biblical scholars, after interacting with the disciplines of literary criticism and the branches of historical criticism emerging in the nineteenth century, learned still more from the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, research in biblical studies has made astonishing advances through interdisciplinary studies, drawn widely from such fields as anthropology, sociology,



and culturology to philology or historical linguistics. But a number of scholars from Bruno Bauer (1809–82) and Paul-Louis Couchoud (1879–1959) to George Albert Wells (b.1926) have deemed it necessary to ask why the Apostle Paul and the general epistles seem either uninterested in or oblivious to the daily life and teachings of a historical Jesus. The question deserves an answer.

In *Images of Jesus Today*, editors James Charlesworth (b.1940) and Walter P Weaver provide a range of authors who attempt to provide reasonable sketches of a real first-century Jesus. One chapter is titled 'Jesus Research Expands with Chaotic Creativity'. In what might be seen as research in the spirit of Popper, Richard A Horsley of the Jesus Seminar presents his 'bold hypothesis' as to who Jesus was. At a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, I presented a paper comparing the conjectures about a presumed Jesus to a Rorschach test—suggesting that it is easy to project one's own personal values onto the Jesus image. A subsequent article could venture to interface Popper's epistemology and philosophy of science with research by contemporary biblical scholars and their use of the social sciences to help explore how Paul and other Jews of the first century might have convinced themselves that their claims about a human named Jesus/Joshua/Yeshua not only was executed by the government in power but, unknown to the ruling powers, was nevertheless the 'Lord of glory' on earth arriving for the purpose of becoming the ultimate and final atonement.

I suggest that this first-century Christian drama moved in a strikingly different direction, the Gospel of Mark, the earliest Gospel, developing *without* the conjecture that the death of Jesus was atonement for sin. Scholars might by learning from anthropologists venture *inside* the first-century believers' perspective in the hope of learning how especially the Apostle Paul's



David Hume (1711–76)

'justification by faith' psychology might well provide some profound insights for contemporary believers and non-believers in dealing with guilt, forgiveness, and redemption both inside and outside the penal system. The most difficult but profitable part of the venture would likely be the risk of 'translating' some of Paul's 'God talk' into 'community talk', thus moving closer to Popper's naturalism, to deal with the four questions raised above regarding the Apostle Paul's logic and thinking process in trying to solve the issue of guilt in situations when violations of moral standards are too great for expecting any realistic compensation or balance. In short, redemption is a contemporary issue with which every viable society must come to terms. ☞

### References

1. See Brian Dodd, 'Romans 1:17', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 114/3 (Autumn 1995), 470–3.
2. Matthew 5:37.
3. Philippians 2:6–8.
4. Hebrews 9:22.

# Memory

**Swami Satyamayananda**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

**L**ONG-TERM RETENTION of experiences in memory is seen to change the morphology of a brain cell. Change implies change in cellular molecules, which are synthesized from the genetic code. Today, the search is on for a gene or a section of genes that is responsible for synthesizing a specific protein molecule for memory. This task is daunting. To complicate things, it is also seen that the action of each gene is modified and affected by many other genes. This daunting task is made easier with the sequencing of the human genome. Humankind has opened up a new vista by looking at things at the micro level and this has had a tremendous impact on our knowledge. Most geneticists who used to say that genes could explain every aspect of an organism, like the colour of the hair, the quality of the skin, diseases, even complex behaviour, habits, and character have now revised their ideas. Inder Verma, Professor, Laboratory of Genetics at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California, believes that a human being can be conceived of as a sum total of her/his genes. Genes interact with the environment to determine various human characteristics and diseases. Complex organisms are not a bundle of genes, nor do genes alone build particular parts of anatomy or behaviour by themselves. Genes and the environment interact; in short nurture reinforces or retards nature. For instance having a schizophrenic gene means there is an increased risk that one will develop the disease, rather than absolute certainty. This means that rigid genetic laws are not so rigid after all.

The history of science, besides its great advances has been replete with the struggle against theologies that preach predestination. This fatalism was and is galling to modern humans. If science pronounces its cast-iron determinism through inviolable reductionist experiments and mind-boggling journals, it shall preach that very predestination it was fighting all along. Of course the truth is slowly dawning on biologists. They say—after it was determined that there are about 20,000 to 25,000 genes—that there are simply not enough genes for the idea of biological determinism to be right and that the wonderful diversity of human species is not hard-wired in the genetic code.

Even with this setback, which was necessary, genomics today plays a key role and shall continue to do so in the future. Medical diagnosis, customized medicines and vaccines, the growing of human organs, gene therapy, and much more is set to change human society. Today, genetics combined with AI is making these revolutionary changes in society slowly felt. It is also fanning human desire to be the master of life and death on this planet.

## ***In Spiritual Life***

Spiritual aspirants condition themselves to constantly repeat a mantra and remember the chosen deity. A higher spiritual life prescribes remembering one's real divine nature as the Atman. To accomplish either, the aspirant needs also to continuously grapple with subliminal contrary memories that thwart spiritual practice. As one

proceeds towards contemplation, old forgotten memories are churned out of their places to surface and cause consternation and despair. These churned out impressions have not to be paid attention to as they come and go. If a person reacts to them in any way, the impressions will get a fresh lease of life and continue their obstructions. Initially, it is like gingerly sidestepping a sleeping dog to avoid facing a barking racket. Later, the sadhana itself will give rise to a great degree of controlling power that will then keep down, at a command, the old troublesome dogs of memories. This controlling power coupled with detachment shall leave the conscious mind free to penetrate the ultimate mysteries of the universe, immortality, and God.

### **Neurological Basis of Memory**

‘Your joys, your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity, your free will are all in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.’<sup>1</sup>

Every waking moment the brain is subject to the different intensities or wavelengths of electromagnetic energy. The data received is just stupendous but the brain can interpret only a thin slice of these wavelengths. Hence there is a gross mismatch in the amount of input and output. There must be some significant information compression or a deleting agent that removes superfluous information to focus on relevant information for optimal decision-making. Instead of positing such an agent, it is found that the brain itself has serious limitations that form our world. Stimulus energy entering and striking the brain is met with the brain’s own energy or electricity. The brain snaps together to form new patterns of electrical connections that stand for images, touches, smell, sounds, and tastes. Stimulus is the right word, the brain is stimulated into action

and this is its life. It is scary to imagine an unstimulated brain. Imagine thousands of red billiard balls are hitting a hundred yellow billiard balls from all sides. In this chaos some yellow balls are hit right out of the table. The red balls are the sensations and the yellow balls are the brain cells forming random patterns breaking out and reforming in different ways as and when they are hit. Those amongst them that are hit out of the patterns, in the pockets, are the cells that die, never to be replaced. This is equally scary.

Each nerve cell, neuron, has a number of projections called dendrites, of them the larger and longer is called an axon. Each neuron is joined to perhaps as many as ten thousand neurons. However, there is a small gap, a few billionths of an inch wide, called a synapse. Neurons receive, transmit, and store impulses. It is estimated that neurons number one hundred billion, not one alike; each has its own configuration and conducts electricity. Neurons vibrate continuously even while at rest. When a stimulus comes in, the level of electrical charge in them spikes upwards. This spike depends on stimulus strength. Impulses in the neuron don’t flow like water but leap like frogs, thereby gaining speed and avoiding loss of information in transmission. The ‘message’ or chemical or electrical impulse received by one pre-synaptic neuron is transmitted to a post-synaptic neuron via the axon that ‘fires’ chemical molecules called neurotransmitters over the synapse. A chain reaction commences. At that level the activity is terrific; imagine millions of neurons firing, getting hit, pausing, and re-firing at each other. Some signals are underplayed, some amplified, others made to bounce back and forth in the neuron, holding it for a while longer. Thank God we are not aware of this commotion. Yet, it is not as simple as described but it sure takes place at a high speed. Changes in the synaptic gaps are equated with memory

and learning. The plasticity of neurons also endows them with a variety of functions; they can also grow, snap, and unsnap with neighbouring neurons to make different connections.

### **How an Impress Occurs**

Can perception arise when the energy that has arrived has made a cascading effect on the brain cells, even if there are no previous patterns in the very cells to identify the cascade? No! Each time a sensation comes in, it leaves its 'trace'. These traces or impressed cells are called engrams. If there are no engrams, the brain cannot relate to new information. Cognition, thinking, feeling, and willing will be impossible. These engrams are said to reside in the cerebral cortex, the centre of intelligence. The area that is responsible for making engrams is the hippocampus. Sensory inputs of sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing reach their respective centres in the brain where they are processed. From there they are shunted to the hippocampus, which in turn sends them on, in engram form, to the cerebral cortex, during sleep.

Chemically speaking, neurotransmitters manufactured in the brain are released from the pre-synaptic neuron into the synaptic gap. These molecules bind to specific 'receptors' on the post-synaptic neuron's membrane. This linking is helped by a set of secondary messenger molecules. Those 'fired' neurotransmitter molecules are then immediately deactivated by enzymes and mopped up by the pre-synaptic neuron and recycled. These chemical changes are short-term memory. Long-term memory needs protein synthesis, which is activated by the genetic code. It is also seen that different neurotransmitters elicit different responses. Neurobiologists think they are finally zeroing on the actual mechanism but till now cannot pin it down conclusively.

Biologists say that in any given cell a few proteins encode information for hundreds of

reactions taking place within it. These reactions determine cellular growth and development. The same can be said of a neuron. Some active messenger molecules are amino acid glutamate and aspartate. Besides these many more are involved, including calcium and nitric oxide. These chemical molecules in turn give rise to a host of enzymes. With such chemicals involved, it is natural that neurons will change all the time due to various chemical reactions. Even if this is viewed from the electrical standpoint, it is common knowledge that continuous electrical activity moulds, fashions, and deforms cell membranes. Simple tasks and simpler thoughts are a combination of various neural functions. And hence a holistic view recognizes that there are several overlapping kinds of neural machinery working simultaneously.

The reason why humans dream is not yet fully understood. Studies on some animals also show they dream. One of the uses of dreams is that the mind shuffles, selects, and categorizes impressions and puts them in long-term storage areas. During the day the brain is beset with its moment-to-moment workings to keep the body alive, interactive, and safe. Hence, it keeps up the real housework for later. On waking up, it is common to find a solution to a problem that the mind was troubled with before going to sleep. A person may be lying inert while dreaming but the brain is on high gear. This phase of sleep—called the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) phase—is characterized by vivid dreams. Even in deep dreamless sleep, which exhibit lazy brain wave pattern called Delta, the brain is busy compartmentalizing impressions.

### **Main Aspects of Memory**

**Implicit Memory** • Also called long-term and procedural memory. A very large part of our lives is dictated by conditioned responses.



SCULPTURE: 'NEURON' BY ROXY FAINE AT FREDERIK MEIJER GARDENS AND SCULPTURE PARK, GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN, USA. SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.MARCYNAPARZYCH.BLOGSPOT.IN](http://www.marcynnaparzych.blogspot.in)

Conditioning is accomplished through constant repetition of an act or thought for a given time. It commences with conscious deliberate performance then it becomes automatic and unconscious. Motor skills, playing a musical instrument, and the like, are conditionings and have become impressed on our minds. The conscious mind has no access to it. This is also typical of what Pavlovian experiments show. Long-term memory is very resilient.

**Explicit Memory** • Also known by other names like declarative and episodic memory. There is a faint glimmer of consciousness. One speaks of churning or seeking the mind for facts. This has a very large storehouse. It contains both the useful and the trash we have collected all along and is subject to loss.

**Semantic Memory** • It is found to be intact even when Explicit memory fails. This system is resilient. Communication through languages learnt

and recalled in the right sequence and time depends on this. The activity is more marked when people are multilingual. One hears words in English, can understand them in Hindi, to further translate them into Bengali. Understanding of meanings and concepts of words and symbols also falls within this category. Semantic memory too starts with conscious learning but later there is no conscious access. This system has a very large capacity. Semantic memory extends itself to primary sensations to create newer levels of experience.

**Working Memory** • The real workhorse. Our daily lives with its moment-to-moment existence would be impossible without it. If a millionaire's millions are locked away and are inaccessible in a bank, he is no better than a pauper. Similarly, engrams would have been useless if this system did not put them to work. Working memory is called the mind's retrieval system.

There is a belief that humans are born with a fixed number of neurons and that these cells do not replicate themselves. The quantity—thousands being lost every day from the age of twenty years—thus diminishing makes old patterns of memory blur with age while making learning new things difficult. The other belief is that new memories do not need new cells, just new ways of stringing older ones. The sight of a rose will give rise to the network of related engrams that tells one all about it. Billions of neurons can be arranged in countless combinations. But beliefs are not facts; somehow this paradigm has held its ground till now. Recent findings state that the hippocampus, apart from making engrams, is also found to be manufacturing new neurons and shunting them to the cortex. This has brushed aside the two paradigms of a fixed quantity of neurons and new memories being mere stringing of the old in new patterns. No one has seen an engram or trace where and how they reside in the cells but the agency of a neurotransmitter, N-Methyl D-Aspartate (NMDA), is suspected.

### **Memory Depends on the Total Health of the Organism**

It is known that health of the body is important in retaining memory and its loss in older people can be arrested by simple calisthenics, good low-fat diet, certain herbs popular in alternate medicine, and mentally stimulating games like chess, scrabble, and bridge. Endocrine glands and healthy circulation also have a role in memory. Acupressure, selective pressure applied on parts of the palms and soles to activate the particular body's vital force channels, also claims that willpower can be increased; this helps in making memory and its retrieval unwavering. The Indian medical treatise, Ayurveda and Homoeopathy claim that the nervous system can

be toned with certain medicines. This has taken the perspective of memory out of just the brain and its functioning and has thrown it all over the body. It is also seen that the immune system has a kind of memory that recognizes certain pathogens from their chemical signals and attacks them accordingly.

*The Memory Bible* by psychiatrist Gary Small, talks about certain foods that improve memory. Fruits and vegetables rich in antioxidants absorb free radicals, unstable oxygen molecules. The more these unstable molecules collide and zip around in the brain, the greater is the chance of the brain being susceptible to memory loss. Carbohydrates increase cellular activity including cerebral functions. There is however a danger of an increase in sugar levels, for diabetics are known to suffer memory lapses and strokes can cripple them. Omega-3 fatty acids found in oily fish help in maintaining the fluidity of cell membranes and improving communications between neurons. Proteins boost memory and also help a foetus.

There is first a registration of sensations. These sensations go to short-term memory where some of them are consolidated and then sent over to long-term memory. Recall involves retrieval from long-term to short-term memory from where it is put to work. This is a simple working model of memory. This model however has many ramifications. It is found that short and long-term memories have independent neural systems. Due to trauma or other causes some people have their old memories intact but cannot learn anything new. Two neural storage systems would possibly require two corresponding retrieval systems or maybe just a very versatile one. Theories and studies regarding the neurological basis of memory are optimistic that answers are just around the corner. Each new study, however, attended with

elation has been short lived, like short-term memory, in fact too short lived, helping raise scepticism. How many neural connections define these pages you are holding? How do abstract concepts of some of these words register? How does one know what one has just read is related to one's own experiences, *karmashaya*, or from a book or discussion, *jnanashaya*? How do words, sounds, and meanings unfold? An excess of the NMDA neurotransmitter bolsters memory storage. Some mice were bred without this neurotransmitter by tinkering with their genes. These mice showed, predictably, serious memory deficiencies but when exposed to a stimulating environment full of toys and other sensations, these mice showed a leap in memory capacity. Dissected later and seen under an electron microscope, their hippocampus showed new neural connections. How did these connections form in the absence of the much-touted neurotransmitter? Further, people with mild or severe injuries to the cerebral cortex invariably show amnesia of recent and even old memories but after some time, even years later, memories return making some neurologists believe that memory is stored in multiple areas.

The brain is so resilient that functions lost in one area due to surgery or other causes, are taken over by other areas. An exact location is now ruled out but the frontal lobes are assigned to put memory to work. Another neurological inadequacy is that it cannot explain the ego that harmonizes all the systems and sub-systems of memory to form a coherent subject with coherent experiences. Both these systems, semantic and episodic, have two divisions, sensory input and motor output. In normal circumstances semantic and episodic systems are in balance. But this explanation too has been found inadequate on deeper levels.

### **Neurological Reductionism and 'Complementarity' in Nature**

If consciousness, life, identity, and so on is a mere grey matter it implies that everything we are and have is tenuous and transitory; for this is the nature of matter that comprises the body and the brain. Yet, it is impossible for humankind to reconcile itself to this fact as it is deeply unsatisfying to the indomitable human spirit. If life were just neuronal processes, the very meaning and purpose of life would vanish. Morality and ethics and everything that is dear to the human heart shall be pulled away and the feeling of emptiness will grip and destroy humanity even before the natural death of the organism.

Humanity knows intuitively that there has to be a higher dimension to life, and why not, this is the very dimension that creates the urge to believe and search for that dimension. No doubt great scientists have uncovered neurobiological facts but they give us only a very limited view of matter. The studies of a scientist also tear apart our complacent conceptions and cosy beliefs of the external world: 'Any one aspect of the visual information provided by your eyes is usually ambiguous' (28). 'It is difficult for many people to accept that what they see is a symbolic interpretation of the world—it all seems to be like "the real thing"' (33). 'Seeing involves active processes in your brain that lead to an explicit multilevel, symbolic interpretation of the visual scene' (35).

This then is grey matter and the external world but like many things, no one can say with finality that this is the end of knowledge regarding neurons and life. If life and personal identity can be reduced to molecular levels, it is improper to stop here. Physicists, who have pushed the search even further than the molecular level to the atomic and still deeper, find the

ordinary concepts of matter and force disappear into a ceaseless, limitless, interconnected dance of energy or subatomic particles. This so-called 'matter' behaves in a dual nature of waves and particles.

Science seeks to understand the unity behind the phenomena, as Swami Vivekananda says, 'Unity in variety is the plan of creation.'<sup>2</sup> This dichotomy could not be left as it was. Niels Bohr showed, in his now famous words, that it was 'complementary'. In the 'quantum-relativistic' realm of 'matter', it is also found that the observer's perspective is dominant. How do we fit in these facts to neurons and neurotransmitters? The truth is that every view of Nature is partial but taking this partial view for the whole only aids in creating scientific fanaticism and superstition.

The idea of complementarity that is embedded in Nature has to be taken into account and shown even in neurobiology. Neural processes are no doubt important and do answer many questions but the 'other side' may necessarily not be apparent yet it exerts a tremendous influence on visible processes. It is like the fourth dimension of time that curls matter or vice versa which is not perceived yet the other three dimensions cannot exist without it. If this is not accepted and acknowledged the three-dimensional Newtonian world that is experienced by the brain will be found to be absolutely real instead of an illusion. No doubt minds are conditioned by culture and education and generally one sees only that which one wants to. This lop-sidedness needs to be loped off for real progress and understanding.

Neurosurgeons have prodded, with mild electric impulses, different areas of a live brain in order to know how it responds. Patients experienced very vividly a revival of old memories covering all the five senses. They have also tried to

map the brain's specific sites for specific memories. Now we know that the brain's functions cannot be rigidly mapped. For instance, a left-handed person might have language processed on the right side of the brain while it is mostly done on the left side. So with other functions, all experts acknowledge flexibility of the brain functions. Neurologists have also conducted extensive experiments on split-brain subjects, rejecting reductionistic explanations of mental phenomena, which hold that all mental phenomena can be ultimately reduced to physical and chemical reactions.

### **Hippocampus and Emotions**

The hippocampus, so long neglected, has come in for a good deal of scrutiny. It forms part of the limbic system, which is associated with emotions. Every significant or insignificant memory is vivid due to an emotional touch, either positive or negative. If memories do not have an emotional touch they fade quickly. Hence it is safe to surmise that emotions have a great role in making us remember things. Sensations of fear, hunger, lust, and so on report to the lower brain that reacts accordingly, it then sends the information to the cortex to reinforce the reaction. Subconscious impulses work with cognition. These cognitions in turn become subconscious. Both the conscious and subconscious work in tandem. This shall bring in the psychological aspect, for emotions and drives primarily belong to the domain of the subconscious.

*(To be continued)*

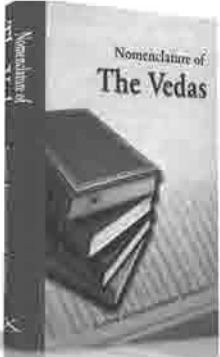
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# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



## **Nomenclature of The Vedas**

Swamini Atmaprajnananda  
Saraswati

DKPrintworld, Veda Sri, F 395, Sudarshan Park, New Delhi 110015.  
Website: [www.dkprintworld.com](http://www.dkprintworld.com).  
2012. XXVI + 234 pp. ₹ 600.  
ISBN 13: 9788124606445.

The Vedas are the bulwark of Indian philosophy and the Hindu Religion. They are a voluminous mass of hymns and narratives which have come down to us through an unbroken oral tradition. The art of writing and later of printing have made this ancient literature available to anyone interested in the history of human thought. Thus the Vedic texts are accessible to anyone now and yet a colossal ignorance prevails among the masses about the contents of the Vedas.

The book under review is an authentic collection of all the topics that form the core material of the Vedas. The contents are spread over seven chapters. The first chapter is titled 'Nomenclature of the Vedas'. The author narrates in brief the contents including the various branches of the Vedas. The geographical location of the emergence of these contents, the various *sambhitas* associated with various Vedas and how they developed into the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas*, and the Upanishads are traced in this chapter.

The next chapter is on the Rig Veda running over sixty pages and it describes about six branches of the Rig Veda namely *Shakala*, *Bashkala*, *Sankhayana*, *Ashvalayana*, *Mandukya*, and *Aitareya*. The contents of all the *mandalas* are presented in a tabular form and it serves as a ready reckoner to get at a particular *rishi* or *sukta*. Chapters three and four deal with the Shukla Yajur Veda and the Krishna Yajur Veda for over twenty pages. Chapter five is on the Sama Veda.

Chapter six, which runs over forty-three pages, is on the Atharva Veda. The author rightly points out the importance of the Atharva Veda as a valuable tool for the study of folklore and ethnology. The Atharva Veda has no place in sacrificial religion. The author has cited authorities like Lakshman Sarup and Rajabali Pande. There is also a paragraph about the cultural value of the Atharva Veda. The author presents the content of the Atharva Veda highlighting its irrelevance in Vedic sacrifices. The author has presented the contents of the Atharva Veda in the same style.

Chapter seven presents a brief study of all the extant commentaries on the Vedas as also translation of the Vedas from across the world. This chapter runs over forty pages. The author says that the first generation *rishis* were seers, *drashtas*, of the mantras. They had direct knowledge of the mantras. But subsequent generations were competent only to interpret the mantras and therefore various commentaries were written and studied by successive generations. Thus we have commentators, *Bhashyakaras* like Devaswami, Narayanaswami, and Udgitha—all of the seventh century CE; Madhvacharya of the thirteenth century, Sayanacharya of the fourteenth century, and many others. These commentaries are of great help in interpreting the Vedas. This chapter also contains information about the various European scholars and their studies of the Vedas.

Thus the entire study of the Vedas is contained in these two hundred pages of the book by the learned author. The presentation of the entire material is graphic and well tabulated, and a look of modernity is given to the ancient lore. This is bound to help research scholars. The author has followed the dictum: '*Na Amoolam Likhyate Kinchit*, nothing that is not there in the Vedas will be written or should be written.' Reading this beautiful volume is extremely satisfying.

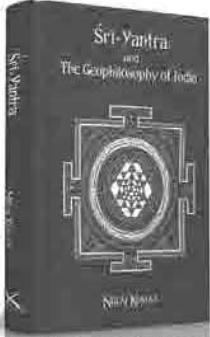
The author, Swamini Atmaprajnananda

Saraswati, is a talented scholar since her pre-monastic days and this book exudes the fragrance of her scholarship and discipline.

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**Sri-yantra and the  
Geophilosophy of India**

Niraj Kumar

D K Printworld (P) Ltd, 'Ved-  
dasri', F-395, Sudarshan  
Park, New Delhi 110 015.  
Website: [www.dkprintworld.com](http://www.dkprintworld.com).  
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ISBN 13: 9788124607268.

**G**eophilosophy is philosophy conceived as a function of geography. Is it a pure accident that the contours of the 'Perennial Philosophy' of India, the acknowledged nerve-centre of spiritual metaphysics, are what they are? Or, are there more fundamental causes at work that lend a spiritual turn to its philosophical speculations? The book under review propounds the thesis that 'the concept of geophilosophy, or to be more precise geometaphysics, is an enduring bond between the philosophical thought and its terrestrial support' (blurb). The major premise of Geophilosophy is 'that essentially, the geographical positioning of a country influences its thinking and thus impacts its philosophy'. The significant corollaries of such a novel postulate are (a) the pivotal role of a country's location in fashioning its philosophy and (b) the role of the physical shape and profile of the country in determining the parameters of its basic trends of speculation.

The first chapter of this thought-provoking book titled 'The Geophilosophy of India and Sri-yantra' enunciates and elaborates the basic canons of geophilosophy. The second chapter, captioned 'What is India?' attempts to examine and understand the drift of India's metaphysical speculation in the light of the canons enunciated. Such crucial factors as India's history from antiquity, its narratives in mythologies, and epics revolving round its salient geographical features, its special focus on Mt Meru, the *axis mundi* of the cosmos, the

popularity of pilgrimages, the algorithm of Indian landscape, the rich legacy of India consisting in its mountains, seven sacred rivers, seven seers, and so on, the much-touted fact of unity in diversity, and numerical addiction to such numbers as seven and three are all studied as the factors moulding the unique profile of India. At the end of the chapter, the author poses some pertinent questions: 'How does geophilosophy that reflects India's unique triangular landscape reshape the grammar of sanctification? How does Sri-yantra emerge as the site for the synthesis of varying thought-currents? Can we view Sri-yantra as abstract encapsulation of the structure of Indian civilisation?' (47).

The title of the third chapter, 'Sri-yantra the Ultimate Code of Indian Civilisation' says it all. The central theme of this and the following chapters is Sri-yantra, which 'has made a strong footprint in the geophilosophy of India and beyond, and has a major stake in India's landscape, code of Indian civilization' (blurb). It spells out the conspicuous characteristics of Indian thinking such as 'preponderance of abstract notion, abstract conceptions treated as concrete realities, fondness for the negative expression, grasping the absolute negatively, attraction for the unknown, minimizing individuality and specific preferences, unity of all things, static quality of thought, lack of common-sense concept of time, continuity of one's self and other selves, consciousness of existence of self, lack of notion of order in the objective natural world, lack of historical consciousness and introspective and metaphysical character of thinking' (48). We are also reminded 'how thinking and culture in India are governed by context sensitive grammar' (ibid.). The dominance of triadic thinking in Indian mind, which itself is the offshoot of the geophilosophical domain, is ascribed to the influence of the triangular topography. The diagrammatic details of Sri-chakra, its symbolic significance, its resemblance to the human body in microcosmical terms, its unique profile with the interlocking of primary triangles which produces secondary triangles, the six-pointed hexagram embedded in its design, are all dealt with here. The Sri-yantra is called the king of yantras. The description of how a sacred triangle can be drawn on India's geobody is also given.

The fourth chapter identifies Sri-yantra with

Meru. The origin of the concept of Meru is analysed. Contributions of eminent mathematicians such as Aryabhata and Varahamihira to the unravelling of Meru concept are recorded and explained. Sri-yantra is called the indexical representation of Meru. The obsession of various branches of Indian philosophy with Meru is highlighted. Meru is described as ‘the ultimate Utopia of Indian mind where there is neither sorrow nor old age, disease, or lack of any splendid thing’ (74). It is pointed that Sri-yantra emerged only under the influence of mathematicians. The three ways of creating Sri Chakra are spelt out. To quote the author, ‘Sri-yantra is the synthesis of different routes to apprehend Meru, the peak of immortality’ (79). Sri-yantra is hailed as ‘the combinatorial matrix of Indian civilisation. It is the Meru of Indian civilisation’ (ibid.).

Chapters five and six titled, ‘Sri-yantra: Structural Properties’ and ‘Sri-Yantra and Quest for Higgs Boson’ respectively, are difficult to negotiate as they abound in mathematical, algebraic, and geometrical formulae, symbols, and computations, and are couched predominantly in mathematical jargon. A good grounding in higher mathematics and physics would seem to be necessary to understand the chapters. Suffice it to say that the sciences of mathematics and physics lend their weighty support to the authenticity and utility of Sri-yantra as a spiritual launching-pad and spacecraft to reach the great beyond.

In chapter seven titled ‘Sri-yantra: Footprints from Katra to Paris’, the exciting story of the discovery of the geometrical patterns similar to those embedded in Sri-yantra in a certain spot in Paris and also in Katra, the foothill of the sacred seat of Vaishno Devi Shrine in India is narrated with a plethora of geographical details.

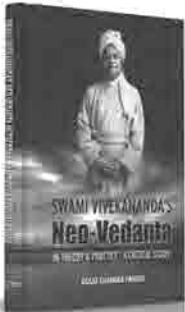
Chapter eight titled ‘Bharata Mata: Map and Sri-yantra’ launches a scholarly attempt to study the parallels between the form and structure of Sri-yantra and those of the map of Bharata Mata, India. A typically representative extract from the chapter should reveal the direction in which the winds of creative reflection and analytical thought are blowing. Adverting to the parallelism between Bharata Mata and Tripurasundari, the author says, ‘Bharata Mata emerged from the evolving form of the Tripura Goddess. The cult

of Maha-Tripurasundari and the Sri-Vidya is the sheaf that binds India’s different traditions. ... Sri-Vidya tradition is also the ritualization of triadism inherent in Indian civilisation. There are three levels of worship—*sthula* (gross), *sukhma* (subtle), and *para* (transcendental). One can see how in the case of Bharata Mata, she is worshipped as an idol, as the cartographic map and then as the patriotic spirit. Just like Sri-Vidya, where there is another triad of *yantra-mantra-tantra*, the Bharata Mata case is characterised by the slogan, “Vande Mataram”, the map is a homologic resonance to Sri-yantra with its abstract symbolism and the image of Bharata Mata itself appears to be the image Tripurasundari. Just as Sri-yantra is the seat of Goddess Tripura (Lord of Three Cities), cartographic map is the seat of Bharata Mata. Sri-yantra is covered by a *bhupura*, a rectangular boundary. The map of Bharata is enclosed within a rectangular boundary’ (155–6).

Chapter nine is titled ‘Pleading for a New National Flag’. Positing that the core of the task of conceptualizing and designing of the national flag is the choice of an evocative emblem, the author eloquently says that ‘the emblem must echo the heart and mind of the people. Sri-yantra, as an emblem in a triangular national flag retaining the tri-colour will be unique and also represent the soul and territory of India’ (204). A diagrammatic representation of the proposed ‘simple flag incorporating India’s triadic destiny’ (ibid.) is given in this chapter. It is recommended as a template for devising ‘a truly Indian flag that will encapsulate India’s history and territory’ (ibid.). The bibliography and the index given at the end of the book are quite useful.

The well-produced book, bearing on its front cover the crimson-hued representation of Sri-yantra in sparkling brightness, promises an exciting swing through the variegated and complex landscape comprising verdant meadows of descriptive narrative, undulated terrain of abstruse analysis in terms of physics and mathematics and radiant avenues of robust thinking and passionate exposition. The book is a welcome stimulant to the avid lay-reader while it is a veritable feast for the specialist with devout and spiritual sensibilities.

N Hariharan  
Madurai



**Swami Vivekananda's Neo Vedanta in Theory and Practice: A Critical Study**

Dulal Chandra Panday

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029.  
2012. ix + 130 pp. ₹ 75, ISBN 13:  
9789381325155.

It must be clarified that the teachings of Swami Vivekananda were not based on any new form of Hinduism, nor was it a 'neo' adaptation of the age-old Vedanta. In fact, as explained by Sister Nivedita in the introduction to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 'What Hinduism needed, amidst the general disintegration of the modern era, was a rock where she could lie at anchor, an authoritative utterance in which she might recognise her self ... For ages to come the Hindu man who would verify, the Hindu mother who would teach her children, what was the faith of their ancestors will turn to the pages of these books for assurance and light.' What Vivekananda really did was that he revived, organized, and consolidated the age-old philosophy of 'being and becoming', which in its universality could embrace the whole of humanity.

This present work, the outcome of a doctoral thesis by the author, is a critical study of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda in theory and practice, and its relevance in present day society. The author has tried to give a skimming explanation of Vedanta, its modern 'interpretation' and 'application' by Swami Vivekananda and how it is a solution to all the problems of present day humanity. The author has tried to establish with various arguments and examples that the religious and cultural renaissance that occurred in nineteenth century Bengal and later spread across the rest of India, reached its utopia with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. This revival of the ancient religion is termed as 'Neo-Vedanta' which stresses not doctrines but practical application of spirituality in day-to-day life.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter the author has given an overview of 'classical' Vedanta and a brief account of its various schools. He has also given a short historical account of its revival in the nineteenth century under

various religious leaders and reformers, most importantly Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In the second chapter the author has attempted an ontological study of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, by explaining Brahman, jiva, and jagat, and their interrelation from a theoretical standpoint as explained by the great world teacher. The author explains that the absolute reality, Brahman, appears to become manifest as the body-mind-world complex, jiva-jagat, out of the apparent phenomenon known as Maya. Although the jiva-jagat is non-eternal and objective from the phenomenal point of view, they are essentially and transcendently non-different from Brahman. The third chapter sheds light on the various aspects of the four yogas—Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, and Raja, and their practical synthesis as explained by Swami Vivekananda. He impresses on the readers that the four yogas are interrelated spiritual disciplines and their synthesis in one's life is the surest way to attain spiritual perfection. In the fourth chapter the author explains the moral and the social ideal according to Swami Vivekananda. He puts forth that all the ideals of morality and humanism, though relative, can achieve perfection only in the knowledge of absolute unity of all beings. Referring to various quotations from Swami Vivekananda the author drives home the point that the elevation of the empirical world, *vyavaharika jagat*, with all its ethical and moral dilemmas to the level of transcendental perfection, *paramarthika*, can be attained only through the deification of all actions and serving all humanity as the reflection of the supreme Self. In the fifth and final chapters, the author summarizes the contribution of Swami Vivekananda in the revival of Vedanta both in theory and in practice and how his teachings play a significant role in the all-round development of the individual—morally, socially, and spiritually.

In simple language the book provides an overall view of Vedanta and its various aspects as preached by Swami Vivekananda. It will prove beneficial to readers who would like to go through a brief study of Vedanta in theory and practice in the present context.

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# REPORTS

## **Commemoration of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Swami Vivekananda**

On 10 September 2014, a bronze bust of Swamiji was unveiled in front of the Maison de L'Inde (House of India) at Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris (CIUP) in Paris. CIUP is a private park near where Swamiji stayed in 1900. The bust was donated by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. Marcel Pochard, president of CIUP; Arun Kumar Singh, Ambassador of India to France; Bikas Sanyal, Director, Maison de L'Inde; and Swami Vitamohananda, monk incharge of Gretz centre, were present.

The following centres held various programmes to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. **Delhi:** Two three-day value-education workshops in Chennai and Hyderabad between 2 and 11 September; 135 teachers were trained. Fifty-four puppet shows on Swamiji in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka from 8 August to 6 September, and eleven shows in USA and Canada from 19 to 28 September. **Kadapa:** A youth convention at Proddatur in Kadapa district on 26 August; 1,400 youths participated. **Kalady:** A value-education programme on 19 September attended by about 500 students and teachers. **Pune:** A two-day youth convention on 13 and 14 September; 400 youths participated. A state-level seminar on 'Unity in Diversity' on 27 September and a regional interfaith dialogue on 28 September attended by 375 and 350 people respectively. **Rajkot:** A seminar on 'Harmony of Religions' on 11 September attended by 600 people. **Swamiji's Ancestral House, Kolkata:** A public meeting



*Value-education programme at Mangalore*

on 11 September attended by 350 people. Seven programmes were held at different places in and around Kolkata from 23 August to 17 September; in all, about 6,150 people attended. **Vadodara:** Fifteen programmes on group counselling, seminars, and meetings on positive thinking and parenting were conducted from 15 July to 7 September at different venues in Vadodara, Bharuch, and Ahmedabad districts; attended altogether by 4,350 youths, students, and parents.

## **News of Branch Centres**

Radha Mohan Singh, Union Agriculture Minister, inaugurated Vivekananda Kisan Chhatravas (Vivekananda Farmers' Hostel) at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Morabadi, Ranchi**, on 26 August. The annual convocation of **Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University** for the faculties of Disability Management and Special Education (DMSE) and General and Adapted Physical Education and Yoga (GAPEY) was held at Coimbatore on 13 September, in which 222 candidates were awarded certificates, degrees, and doctorates. Dr Jayanti S Ravi, Higher and Technical Education Commissioner, Government of Gujarat, was the guest of honour, and Swami Suhitananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, who is also the Chancellor of the University, presided over the meeting. Celebrating its platinum jubilee, **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Visakhapatnam**, held a written quiz contest on Swamiji with about 18,000 students from 125 schools. Srimat Swami Prabhahanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna

Math and Ramakrishna Mission, unveiled the new nine-foot fibreglass statue of Swamiji at the Salona campus of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidya-pith, Deoghar**, on 11 September. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the lower primary and upper primary school buildings of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunji**, at Ladmawphlang on 12 September. The water treatment plant with a capacity of 2,000 l per hour installed by **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Rajahmundry**, at Rampachodavaram in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh for the local tribal people was inaugurated on 14 September. Swami Suhitananda inaugurated the electrical sub-station building at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Hatamuniguda**, on 23 September and on 24 September, he inaugurated the hostel building for senior boys and laid the foundation stone for the proposed vocational training centre. **Ramakrishna Math, Mangalore**, conducted value-education programmes for college lecturers and students on 9 to 11 September, attended by 450 lecturers and 1,050 students. Sri R V Deshpande, Higher Education Minister, Government of Karnataka, inaugurated the programme. The second anniversary of Ma Sarada Kutir (Kala Babu Kunj) was celebrated by **Ramakrishna Math, Vrindaban**, on 12 September attended by about 200 outstation devotees and 150 local people. A spiritual retreat was conducted on 13 September with 200 delegates.

### Relief

**Drought Relief · Rajasthan:** From 28 July to 5 August, **Khetri** centre distributed 32,000 l of drinking water among 1,320 families facing acute water scarcity.

**Flood Relief · Jammu & Kashmir:** In the wake of the devastation caused by flash floods and landslides in a major portion of the state, **Jammu** centre distributed 1,700 kg flour, 1,385

kg dal, 264 kg edible oil, 60 loaves of bread, 50 bottles of pickles, 1,180 packets of biscuits, 601 kg sugar, and 1,000 bars of washing soap among 694 families of 11 villages in Marh, Khour, and Halwal blocks of Jammu district from 8 to 17 September. **Odisha: Puri** Math conducted medical relief operations in 9 villages of Puri district in the month of September in which 750 patients were treated. **West Bengal: Naora** centre distributed 500 kg chira (rice flakes), 167 kg sugar, 45 kg biscuits, and 3 kg milk powder among 580 families of 6 villages in South 24 Parganas district from 17 to 24 August.

**Distress Relief ·** The following centres distributed various items, shown against their names, to needy people: **India: Belgharia:** 482 saris, 82 dhotis, 408 lungis, 157 shirts, 55 pants, 179 frocks, and 248 blankets among 711 families in the month of September. **Chandipur:** 128 dhotis and 14 vests from 27 July to 2 September. **Karimganj:** 150 saris and 150 dhotis on 2 September. **Malda:** 1,000 saris and 100 children's garments. **Manasadwip:** 1,800 saris, 1,500 dhotis, and 500 lungis from 14 to 27 September. **Narottam Nagar:** 1,014 notebooks, 210 school bags, 240 pens and an equal number of pencils, erasers, and sharpeners among 240 students from 15 July to 17 September. **Vrindaban:** 42 pressure cookers, 27 utensils, 7 pots, 13 plates, 17 tumblers, 8 tiffin carriers, 17 buckets, 27 LPG cylinders, 8 stoves, and 29 trunks among 100 poor widows on 14 September, and 1,000 kg rice, 1,000 kg flour, 250 kg lentils, 250 kg edible oil, 500 kg salt, and 125 kg sugar among 500 poor widows on 14 and 23 September. **Bangladesh: Dhaka:** 450 kg flour, 450 kg suji (semolina), 450 kg sugar, 450 l of edible oil, and 450 saris among 450 families on 28 September.

**Rehabilitation · Uttarakhand:** The foundation stones of the reconstruction of the girls' hostel building and construction of a new PG block of Anusuya Prasad Bahuguna Government PG College in Agastyamuni was laid on 29 August by the Headquarters, through the **Dehradun** centre. **West Bengal: Naora** centre arranged for the renovation work of three huts of poor families in Canning-II and Bhangar-I blocks in South 24 Parganas district.



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