

Swami Vivekananda : The Prophet-Poet of Indian English Literature

Anil Kumar

Swami Vivekananda, commonly read and interpreted as a philosophical thinker, a brilliant orator and a world-moving sanyasi, was endowed with an extraordinary poetic set-up of mind and heart who chose to express the doctrines of his faith in well-crafted verse which have both spiritual and literary values. His poems are to the highest degree self-revealing and introspective which unveil the inconceivable spiritual mysteries and make an irresistible urge on the readers' mind for lofty spiritual realisations. The Vedic conception is that the poet is he who pursues the path of the right (Ritam) and establishes its validity on the basis of his experience for the progressive march of human evolution. He has the power to envision the Truth (Kavyah Satyadrastarah), and is gifted with luminous intelligence and immediate perception. The Vedic saints remarked :

“Kavirmanishi Paribhu Swayambhuh”.

(Poets and thinkers are inwardly inspired, Bhasya 17)

All these qualities are perfectly present in Vivekananda. He himself reiterates at one place, though in a different version.

That man cannot be truly religious who
has not the faculty of feeling the beauty
and grandeur of arts. True poetry must
always be spiritual. (Disciples, Eastern
and Western 47)

India is proud with a long list of saints who were great musicians and great poets also viz. Kabir, Surdas, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Nanak, Dadu et al. Even the great Vedic saints who contributed various ‘Richas’ in ‘Samhitas’, ‘Brahmans’, ‘Aranyaks’, and ‘Upanishads’ were first and foremost the great poets who gave vent to the expression of their directly-perceived Truths in beautiful rhythmic verse. The well-known propounder of ‘Advaita Philosophy’, Adi Shankaracharya, had himself glorified the Sanskrit literature by contributing a large number of beautiful hymns. The composers of the reputed epics of India namely *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* were not only great sages but great poets as well. In the modern age the example may be cited of Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo who were equally known for their exquisite poetry as well as their saintliness.

Like the other Indian English poets of his generation, Vivekananda's poetry gets its evolution from its own blessed land or what he says – the 'Punya Bhumi'. Commenting on his poetic genius, a young woman from the San Francisco chronicle, Blanche Partington writes to the editor of Prabuddha Bharata :

Swami Vivekananda is more than a
teacher, philosopher, he is a poet from
the land of poetry. (Burke 223)

Almost all his poetic creations are linked together with the single thread of Vedanta and recapitulate the summary of his whole teaching in a nutshell. In his poems he has tried to express powerfully the Vedantic concept of the unity of soul, divinity of mankind and the universality of religion with the help of the symbolic images drawn from different sources. The very first poem presented in his poetry collection whose first impression appeared much later in the year 1947 under the title *In Search of God and Other Poems*, is replete with the Vedantic idea of the oneness of soul and exhibits the earnest desire of the individual soul to become one with the Supreme soul, God. After the futile search here and there the poet seems to have realised the presence of God in his own self and thus reaches the culmination of the Vedantic Truth – "Ekoham dwitiyo nasti" (There is one self and not the another). Expressing this divine bliss he says :

"A Flash illumined all my soul,
The heart of my heart opened wide.
O joy, O bliss, what do I find!
My Love, my Love, you are here.
...Thou art, Thou art, the soul of souls
In the rushing stream of life,
'Om Tat Sat Om' Thou art my God.
My Love, I am Thine, I am Thine
(*In Search of God and Other Poems* 4-5)

Expressing the similar theme in one of his poems entitled 'Liberation' Sri Aurobindo announces :

I am the one Being's sole immobile Bliss
No one I am, I who am all that is
(Aurobindo 6)

At another place also Vivekananda expresses the identical Vedantic theme of "Aham Brahma asmi" (I am He) in the following words :

Not two nor many, 'tis but one
And thus in me all me's I have. (*The Complete Works* 7)

The Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism is based on the spiritual doctrines presented by the Indian seers in the Upanishads which Vivekananda considers to be the sublimest piece of poetry ever composed in any language. He points out :

Apart from all its (Upanishad's) merits as the greatest philosophy, apart from its wonderful merit as theology, as showing the path of salvation to mankind, the Upanishadic literature is the most wonderful painting of sublimity that the world has. (234)

Vivekananda has compared this 'painting of sublimity' with those of the Western poets and showed that although there are some wonderful sublime passages in the poems of Milton, Dante, Homer *et al*, there is always the 'grasping of the senses' in them. A close scrutiny of Vivekananda's poems reveals that some of them have reached the height of sublimity. It is this aspect of his poetic genius which prompted Romain Rolland, his biographer, to equate him with the great musician, Beethoven again and again. Talking about his poetic achievement, Dr. R.C. Majumdar, the great historian, says :

Some of his English poems have reached a sublimity of no mean order. (Majumdar 85)

To cite an example :

The stars are blotted out,
The clouds are covering clouds.
It is darkness vibrant sonant,
In the roaring whirling wind.
Are the souls of a million lunatics,
Just loosed from the prison-house,
Wrenching trees by the roots,
Sweeping all from the path.
(*In Search of God and Other Poems* 25)

This Upanishadic connotation of ‘darkness’ in the poem makes it a sublime piece of poetry. Explaining one particular line of the poem – ‘The clouds are covering clouds’, he himself reiterates :

Now mark the description of darkness by three poets. Take our own Kalidas – “Darkness which can be penetrated with the print of a needle’, then Milton- “No light but rather darkness visible”, but come now to the Upanishads- “Darkness was covering darkness”, “Darkness was hidden in darkness.” (*The Complete Works* 350)

The Vedanta philosophy lays stress on the permanence of soul and its formless and sexless nature. It is, infact, unknowable like the Supreme-Soul God, as it is one with Him. Registering this feeling of the realisation of the Self, Vivekananda exclaims :

The sexless self! Whose father He?
Whose child?
Whose friend, whose foe is He who
is but one?
There is but one- The Free-The
Knower-Self!
Without a name, without a form or
stain. (*In Search of God and Other
Poems* 70)

Adi Shankaracharya has also incorporated the same idea in his famous Sanskrit poem the ‘Nirvanshatkam’ :

Na mriyuh na shanka, na me jatibhedah
Pita naiva me naiva mata na janma
Na bandhu na mitram guru naiva shisya...
Aham nirvikalpo nirakar rupo.
(Brahmasthananda 147)

The Vedanta conceptualises this visible world to be an illusion or ‘Maya’- ‘Brahma Satyam, jagat mithya (Only God is true and this world is an illusion). Echoing the same Vedantic concept, Vivekananda says :

This world's a dream
 Though true it seem.
 And only truth is He the living!
 (*In Search of God and Other Poems* 9)

Sri Aurobindo also observes :

All forms are Thy dream-dialect of delight,
 O Absolute, O Vivid, Infinite.
 (Aurobindo 39)

The Bhagwadgeeta has been a perennial source of inspiration to Indian thinkers and philosophers and Vivekananda is not an exception to it. One can easily perceive the impact of the ideas presented in *the Bhagwadgeeta* on his poems. He was deeply impressed by the idea of renunciation and unattached work as discussed by the Lord in *the Bhagwadgeeta*. Celebrating the glory of renunciation and spiritual freedom of the wandering monk, he says :

Have thou no home. What home can hold
 thee, friend?
 The sky thy roof., the grass thy bed; and
 food,
 What chance may bring, well-cooked or
 ill, judge not.
 No food or drink can taint that noble Self
 Which knows itself. Like rolling river free
 Thou ever be, Sanyasin bold!
 (*In Search of God and Other Poems* 18)

Vivekananda considers this spiritual freedom of the wandering - monk to be salvation in life (Jeewanmukti) unlike other philosophical poets who think it to be a thing that can be achieved after death. He opines that the moment a man realises the free - nature of his Self, achieves salvation, living the life as well.

Vivekananda uses a whole range of metrical and stanzaic forms and images ranging from everyday life to philosophical. One finds an undercurrent of spiritual urge in all his poems. In him there is a legacy of epic poets, though he could not compose long narratives in verse because of his preoccupation with missionary responsibilities. He may be called the foremost in the line of the devotional poets of Indian English literature who separated himself from the poetic trend of his forerunner poets and initiated a new kind of poetry which may be called the 'Mantric poetry'

which was brought to its full-fruitition by Sri Aurobindo who stands out to be his true successor. His poems may be treated as classics of Indian English literature as the things discussd in them are of permanent value and interest. Having a direct and intuitive experience of Reality, he can be undeniably established as the prophet-poet of Indian English literature.

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