

# Swamiji: A Bibliophile Extraordinaire and a Library Aficionado

Mr. Animesh Halder<sup>1\*</sup> Salil Chandra Khan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Technical Assistant, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark & AMP, Research Scholar, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

<sup>2</sup> Former Associate Professor, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

**Abstract – Swamiji, a man of extraordinary learning, was a true bibliophile. Wherever he went on all his travels abroad, he visited libraries and wrote back home about them in glowing terms. In spite of his love of books, he never equated reading with either learning or moral and spiritual progress, reiterating that spiritual advancement and enlightenment did not depend on book learning but had its source in our own psyche.**

**Keywords : Swami Vivekananda, Libraries, Knowledge, Education, Learning, Religion.**

**The aim of this paper:**

1. **A short biography of Swami Vivekananda and a discussion on it.**
2. **Swami Vivekananda's views on libraries.**
3. **The relevance today of what Swami Vivekananda says about libraries.**

**Methodology: A scrutiny of all his writings, especially his letters.**

**Findings: While Swami Vivekananda speaks about the overwhelming importance of books and libraries, he also stresses that books alone cannot make a man spiritually cultivated.**

**Originality: This paper looks for the first time at the role of libraries in Swamiji's life.**

----- X -----

## INTRODUCTION

A library attempts to collect and give a permanent place to all branches of knowledge. It is a classified collection of books, a major source of help to anyone who seeks information and knowledge. It gives us its unstinted help in our quests in life, be it in religion, learning or problems of mundane living.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) is a name familiar to and respected by all Indians. He is one of the brightest spiritual stars of the modern world. He was able to change, through his speech in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago and his subsequent travels for four years in the United States, the way the Western world looked at the East. Over and above that, he was able to place India in high regard in the eyes of the Western people by the way he interpreted Indian philosophy, spiritualism and culture.

Sister had said that everyone who knew Vivekananda could feel that here was a man who had realized for himself all that he had ever talked about.

Swamiji's love of study and reading is beyond all attempts to comprehend. He had a thirst for knowledge that covered all its multifarious branches – philosophy, literature, science, history, sociology, music. This extensive reading enabled him to form his arguments. He was always more interested in books that were not part of his college texts. His memory was phenomenal. His Principal in General Assemblies Institution, the renowned scholar Reverend William Hastie, had said Narendra Nath Datta was extremely talented and a student like him was rare in German universities. The eminent indologist Bal Gangadhar Tilak was impressed with his deep fund of knowledge. The young professor of Greek from Harvard, Dr. Wright, had said Vivekananda's erudition was greater than the

combined erudition of all the professors of Harvard taken together.

In his childhood, Vivekananda did not like Mathematics and English. He used to say that Mathematics was for shopkeepers and English was the language of heathens. Later in life he became proficient in both. In his early childhood, he was immersed in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Sanskrit hymns. He could recite all the rules of the Sanskrit primer *Mugdha-bodh*.

Swamiji had a close affinity with libraries. One of his chief characteristics was his deep interest in all subjects. He had had to follow the laid down syllabus at college for his Bachelor's degree, but during his short life, his extensive reading on a wide range of subjects was and is impossible to equal. It is also impossible to match his original and scholarly ideas on such a vast range of subjects. He had quenched his thirst for knowledge at various libraries in various parts of the world. He had always been interested in new subjects, held original views on them, and talked about them as well as writing about them in his letters.

Swamiji had such a close attachment to libraries that in all his various speeches there are constant references to libraries, librarians and how essential they are. In his writings too, there are frequent references to the library.

He says knowledge resides in man himself. It is not extrinsic but innate. What he knows is what he uncovers from his own mind. What he learns is what he finds out for himself.

Swamiji had been most vocal about what the goal of education should be. He says that the highest goal of mankind is the attainment of knowledge.

He says '...the infinite library of the universe is in your own mind. The external world is simply the suggestion, the occasion, which sets you to study your own mind, but the object of your study is always your own mind...'V1 p28. (Vivekananda, 2012).

According to him, learning, especially book learning, had no place in religion. Religion was a matter of being able to feel and sense. Ignorance and poverty were eating into our national psyche. Unless these two scourges are eliminated we cannot find our feet.

'...A man may have read all the libraries in the world and many not be religious at all, and another, who cannot perhaps write his own name, senses religion and realizes it...'V6, p64. (Vivekananda, 2012)

Swamiji was dead against reservation in the field of academics. Education should be universal irrespective of caste creed and wealth. We must give due importance to our indigenous wisdom. Acquisition is not really possession. We can only learn, finally, what

we earn or deserve. And that is controlled by our Karma.

He says '...We may go on accumulating things for our physical enjoyment, but only what we earn is really ours. A fool may buy all the books in the world, and they will be in his library; but he will be able to read only those that he deserves to;...'V1, p31. (Vivekananda, 2012)

Swamiji's idea of education is opposed to our conventional ideas of learning. We have the seed of knowledge dormant in us, it wants development. Spiritual elevation is not about book learning. It requires a feeling for the infinite. Spiritual uplift does not depend on book learning. An unlettered man can be religious whereas a man with formidable reading can fail to be spiritually advanced.

He explains to us '...If you become learned, what of it? Asses can carry whole libraries. So when real light will come, there will be no more of this learning from books- no book-learning. The man who cannot write even his own name can be perfectly religious, and the man with all the libraries of the world in his head may fail to be. Learning is not a condition of spiritual growth; scholarship is not a condition...'V8, p114. (Vivekananda, 2012)

He could get to the bottom of what plagues us a nation and, because he was a spiritual man, nail down the problems and point to exact solutions. The lack of proper education has pulled us down as a nation. Like an experienced physician he made a diagnosis offered the correct treatment.

We know from him '...Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library...'V3 P302. (Vivekananda, 2012)

Education is not an agglomeration of facts and figures. Had it been so, libraries would be wise men. Rather, education is the manifestation of constructive ideas.

Swamiji tells us '...If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopaedias are the Rishis...'V3 P302. (Vivekananda, 2012)

The stories of our Puranas can fill three quarters of the world's libraries.

He says '...Every one of our puranas, if you press it, gives out stories enough to fill three-fourths of the

libraries of the world...’V3 P238. (Vivekananda, 2012)

The bulk of the Vedas is lost to us, but even the little that has come down to us can fill a whole library.

We would not have known but for him ‘...The Vedas, he said, were a huge literature. Ninety-nine per cent of them were missing; they were in the keeping of certain families, with whose extinction the books were lost. But still, those that are left now could not be contained even in a large hall like that...’V3 P435. (Vivekananda, 2012)

Alexandria, the seat of learning during the Ptolemaic rule, was renowned the world over for its library was decimated by marauding Christians.

Swamiji tells us ‘...Here was that city of Alexandria, famous all over the world for its university, its library, and its literati—that Alexandria which, falling into the hands of illiterate, bigoted, and vulgar Christians suffered destruction, with its library burnt to ashes and learning stamped out !...’ V7 P347. (Vivekananda, 2012)

The acquisition of book do not make a man learned .He points out again and again that the mere reading of books is not sufficient for achieving spiritual upliftment.

Swamiji points out ‘...The ass can be burdened with the whole library; that does not make him learned at all. What is the use of reading many books?...’ V1 P477. (Vivekananda, 2012)

#### **At various times he had written to various people about libraries:**

He had written to the Diwanji saying ‘...Your friend Mr. Manibhai has provided every comfort for me; I have seen the library and the pictures of Ravi Varma, and that is about all worth seeing here...’V8 P286. (Vivekananda, 2012)

He had written to Professor John Henry Wright : ‘...Your professor of Sanskrit in his note to Miss Sanborn mistakes me for Purushottama Joshi and states that there is a Sanskrit library in Boston the like of which can scarcely be met with in India. I would be so happy to see it...’V7 P450. (Vivekananda, 2012)

To Miss. Mary Hale he says in his letter, ‘...I have not been to see Mother Temple any more. I could not find time. Every little bit of time I get I spend in the library...’V8 P375. (Vivekananda, 2012)

His letter to Alasinga he says and it shows his deep love research of Hindu scripture : ‘...There was a book published in Mysore in Tamil characters, comprising all the one hundred and eight Upanishads; I saw it in Professor Deussen’s library. Is there a reprint of the

same in Devanagari? If so, send me a copy...’V5 P120. (Vivekananda, 2013)

To Miss. Josephine MacLeod, he talks about a hall he had managed to get where one corner can be fitted as a library. He says ‘...We have a hall now, a pretty big one holding about 200 or more. There is a big corner which will be fitted up as the library...’V6 P374. (Vivekananda, 2012)

About his views on the running of the Math he writes in his letter to Ramakrishnananda :

‘...For the purposes of the Math please hire a commodious house or garden, where everyone may have a small room to himself. There must be a spacious hall where the books may be kept, and a smaller room for meeting the visitors. If possible, there should be another big hall in the house where study of the scriptures and religious discourses will be held every day for the public...’

‘...Anyone who wishes may go to the library and read, but it should be strictly forbidden to smoke there or talk with others. The reading should be silent...’

‘...Books and pamphlets should be sent to the Library...’

‘...Gupta (Swami Sadananda) Librarian ...’V7 P492. (Vivekananda, 2012)

#### **CONCLUSION:**

It can be said in conclusion that the versatile genius of Vivekananda is truly amazing. Many eminent people from all over the world has written in glowing terms about libraries. Vivekananda had not only assessed the usefulness of the library in his rational way, he had been intimately associated with it. Education brings the right kind of consciousness, which in its turn brings progress. This is where a library has an essential role to play. One of the greatest teachers and thinkers, Rabindranath had also felt the need for libraries. In order to have an all round development of our country, it is essential to have education for all strata of society. To achieve this all round education for everyone, we need professionally managed and vibrant libraries throughout the length and breadth of our country.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Adiswarananda, Swami, ed. (2006). Vivekananda, world teacher : his teachings on the spiritual unity of humankind, Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Publications.

- Banhatti, G.S. (1963). The Quintessence of Vivekananda, Pune, India: Suvichar Prakashan Mandal.
- Bharathi, K.S. (1998). Encyclopaedia of eminent thinkers, Vol.08: the political thought of Vivekananda, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Bhuyan, P. R. (2003). Swami Vivekananda: Messiah of Resurgent India, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- Burke, Marie Louise (1958). Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- Burke, Marie Louise (1985). Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries (in six volumes)(3rd ed.), Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- Chakrabarti, Mohit (1998). Swami Vivekananda, poetic visionary, New Delhi: M.D. Publications.
- Chattopadhyaya, Rajagopal (1999). Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography, Motilal Banarsidass Publications.
- Chetananda, Swami (1997). God lived with them: life stories of sixteen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. St. Louis, Missouri: Vedanta Society of St. Louis.
- Dhar, Shailendra Nath (1976). A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, Madras, India: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 2nd ed.
- Gupta, N.L. (2003). Swami Vivekananda, Delhi: Anmol Publications.
- Majumdar, Ramesh Chandra (1963). Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume, Kolkata: Swami Vivekananda Centenary.
- Sen, Amiya (2003), Gupta, Narayani, ed., Swami Vivekananda, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, Benishankar (1963), Swami Vivekananda: A Forgotten Chapter of His Life, Kolkata: Oxford Book & Stationary Co.
- Virajananda, Swami, ed. (2006) [1910], The Life of the swami Vivekananda by his eastern and western disciples... in two volumes (Sixth ed.), Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.
- Vivekananda, Swami (1996). Swami Lokeshwarananda, ed., My India : the India eternal, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.01, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 11th ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.02, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 10th ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.03, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 9th ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.06, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 7th ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.07, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 8th ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.08, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 3rd ed.(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2012). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.09, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama,(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2013). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.04, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama,(Mayavati Memorial Edition)
- Vivekananda, Swami (2013). The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.05, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 12th ed.(150th Birth Anniversary Edition)

---

### Corresponding Author

**Mr. Animesh Halder\***

Technical Assistant, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark & AMP, Research Scholar, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

**E-Mail – [animesh933@gmail.com](mailto:animesh933@gmail.com)**