

CHAPTER- II

CHAPTER- II

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF NARENDRANATH (SWAMI VIVEKANANDA)

Swami Vivekananda was born in the famous Dutta family of Simla, in Calcutta. His family name was Narendranath Dutta. His grandfather, Durga Charan Dutta was a gifted man, well versed in Persian and Sanskrit language and had a great aptitude for law. But at the age of twenty five, after the birth of his son, Vishwanath, he renounced worldly life and became a monk. Vishwanath Dutta, father of Swami Vivekananda, was also endowed with many qualities of head and heart, for which he commanded great respect from one and all. He was proficient in English and Persian language and took delight in the study of the Bible and the poems of the Persian Poet Hafiz. He took to law as a profession and became a successful attorney-at-law in the High Court of Calcutta. He was a man of deep compassion and great sympathy and his charity very often knew no discrimination. Vishwanath was a great lover of music and had a very good voice.

Vishwanath was blessed with a wife Bhuvaneshwari Devi who was his peer in all respect. She won the respect and veneration of all who

came in contact with her and her judgment was followed in the conduct of all affairs that mattered. Calm resignation to the will of God in all circumstances, strength and reserved nature characterised this Hindu women. The poor and the helpless were the special objects of her solicitude.

Of such parents was born, on Monday the 12th January 1863, Narendranath who afterwards as Swami Vivekananda shook the world and ushered in a new age of glory and splendour for India.

The influence of the mother in the formation of the character and the development of the mind of a child is always very great. Naren learnt the Epics and Puranas from his mother, who was a good story teller. He also inherited her memory among other qualities. He, in fact, owed much to her as he used to say later. Naren was all-round. He could sing, was good at sports, had a ready wit, his range of knowledge was extensive, had a rational frame of mind and he loved to help people. He was a natural leader. He was much sought after by people because of his various accomplishments.

Naren passed Entrance Examination from the Metropolitan Institution and F.A. and B.A. Examinations from the General Assembly's Institution [now Scottish Church College]. Philosophy was the first priority with him and Hastie, Principal of the college,

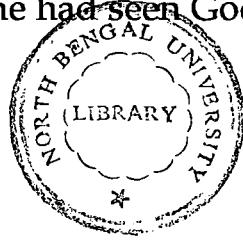
was highly impressed by Naren's philosophical insight. It was from Hastie that he first heard of Sri Ramakrishna.

As a student of Philosophy, the question of God very much haunted his mind. Was there a God? If there was a God, what did He like? What were man's relations with Him? Did He create this world which was so full of anomalies? He discussed these questions with many, but no one could give him satisfactory answers. He looked to persons who could say that they had seen God, but found none. Meanwhile, Keshab Chandra Sen had become the head of the *Brahmo* Movement. He was a great orator and many young people, attracted by his oratory, enrolled as members of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Naren also did the same. For some time he was satisfied with what the *Brahmo Samaj* taught him. But soon he began to feel that it did not quite touch the core of the matters, so far as religion was concerned. A relative of him used to advise him to visit Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, who, he said, would be able to remove all his doubts about religion. He happened to meet Ramakrishna at the house of a neighbour, but there is nothing on record about the impression that he created on Naren's mind. He, however invited Naren to visit him at Dakshineswar some day. As the days passed, Naren began to grow restless about the various riddles that religion presented to him. He particularly wanted to meet a person who could talk about God with the authority of personal experience. Finally, he went to Ramakrishna one day and asked him straightaway if he had seen God. He said, he

202025

17

14 FEB 2003



had, and if Naren so wished, he could even show God to him. This naturally took Naren by surprise. But he did not know what to make of it, for though his simplicity and love of god impressed Naren, his idiosyncrasies made him suspect if Ramakrishna was not a "monomaniac". He began to watch him from close quarters and after a long time he was left in no doubt that Ramakrishna was an extraordinary man. He was the only man he had so far met who had completely mastered himself. Then, he was also the best illustration of every religious truth he preached. Naren loved and admired Ramakrishna but he never surrendered his independence of Judgment. Interestingly, Ramakrishna himself did not demand it of him, or of any other of his disciples. Nevertheless, Naren gradually came to accept Ramakrishna as his master.

Ramakrishna suffered from cancer and passed away in 1886. During his illness, a group of select young men had gathered round him and began to nurse him while receiving spiritual guidance from him. Naren was the leader of this group. Ramakrishna had wanted that they take to monastic life and had symbolically given them *gerua* (saffron) cloth. They accordingly founded a monastery at Baranagar and began to live together, depending upon what they got by begging. Sometimes they would also wander about like other monks. Naren also would sometimes go travelling. It was while he was thus travelling that he assumed the name of Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda travelled extensively through India. Sometimes by train sometimes on foot. He was shocked to see the conditions of rural India -people are ignorant, superstitious, half-starved, and victims of caste-tyranny. If this shocked him, the callousness of the so-called educated upper classes shocked him still more. In the course of his travels he met many princes who invited him to stay with them as their guest. He met also city-based members of the intelligentsia - lawyers, teachers, journalists and government officials. He appealed to all to do something for the masses. No one seemed to pay any heed to him-except the Maharaja of Mysore, the Maharaja of Khetri and a few young men of Madras. Swami Vivekananda impressed on every body the need to mobilize the masses. A few educated men and women could not solve the problems of the country; the mass power had to be harnessed to the task. He wanted the masses to be educated. The ruler of Mysore was among the first to make primary education free within his state. This, however, was not enough in Swamiji's view. A peasant could not afford to send his children to school, for he needed their help in his field. He wanted education taken to the peasant's door-step, so that the peasant's children could work and learn at the same time. It was a kind of 'non-formal' education which perhaps he much thought he had given to the subject and how original he was.

Other princes, or the intelligentsia, as a whole, were impressed by Swamiji's personality, but were much too engrossed with their own

affairs to pay any heed to his appeals. Some of the young men of Madras, Alasinga Perumal specially, dedicated himself to the ideals Swamiji propounded and his contributions to the success of his mission were significant. Swamiji could guess the reason why the so-called leaders of society ignored him. Who was he? A mere wandering Monk. There were hundreds of such Monks all over the country. Why should they pay any special attention to him? By and large, they followed only Western thinkers and those Indians who followed the west and had had some recognition in the west by doing so. It was slave mentality, but that was what characterized the attitude of the educated Indians over most matters. It pained Swamiji to see Indians strutting about in western clothes and imitating western ways and manners, as if that made them really western. Later he would call out to the nation and say: 'Feel proud that you are Indians even if you are wearing a lion-cloth.' He was not opposed to learning from the west, for he knew the western people had some great qualities and it was because of those qualities that they had become so rich and powerful .He wanted India to learn science and technology from the west and its power to organize and its practical sense, but, at the same time, retain its high moral and spiritual idealism. But the selfishness of the so-called educated people pained him more. They were happy if they could care for themselves and they gave a damn to what happened to other people. Swamiji wanted to draw their attention to the miserable condition of the masses-

illiterate, always on the verge of starvation, superstitious and victims of oppression by the upper castes and the rich landlords.

As Swamiji arrived in Madras, young people gathered round him drawn by his bright looks and inspiring talks. They begged him to go to the USA to attend the forthcoming Parliament of Religions in Chicago to represent Hinduism. They even started raising funds for the purpose. Swamiji was at first reluctant but later felt some good might come out of his visit to the west, for if he could make some impression there, his people back at home, who always judged a thing good or bad according as the Western critics thought of it, would then give him a respectful hearing. That is exactly what happened: Swamiji made a tremendous impression, first in the USA and then also in England. The press paid him the highest tributes as an exponent of Indian's age-old values; overnight he became a great national hero in India. Suddenly it was brought home to them that there must be something in India thought that Western intelligentsia feels compelled to admire. Slowly but inevitably, they began to revise their opinions about their own country and civilization. They began to suspect that perhaps they were not as backward as they once thought, and in areas like religion and philosophy, in art and literature, they were perhaps more advanced than the western people. They had always felt sorry about themselves, but, now for the first time, they awoke to the richness of their heritage. This was the starting point of the Indian renaissance one hears about. A long

succession of national leaders starting from Tilak have drawn inspiration from Swami Vivekananda. They discovered India - her strong and weak points - through him. 'If you want to know India, study Vivekananda', was Tagore's advice to Romain Rolland. This holds true even today. Indeed, no one has studied India's body and mind so thoroughly as Swamiji did.

He described India's neglect of the masses as a national sin. Next to this was the sin of neglecting the womanhood. Caste, in its present form, was yet another sin. India's ethnic and religious pluralism did not worry him, for India had always sought her unity in love and respect to different sects and communities. He saw socialism coming and he welcomed it- for India as for the rest of the world. The *Sudras*, i.e. the working people, were sure to come to power and in order that the transition might be peaceful he asked the Brahmins, i.e. the intelligentsia, to pave the way to it. Lest any culture decline occur following this shift he wanted to deluge the country with spiritual thought.

It was Swamiji's hope that India would create a new social order and a new civilization by combining her best spiritual traditions with the latest advancement in science and technology. She would be rich both materially and spiritually. He knew that affluence was not enough; a mental man would have to be a spiritual man too. He

wanted India to set an example in respect of a life high and greater than the present one.