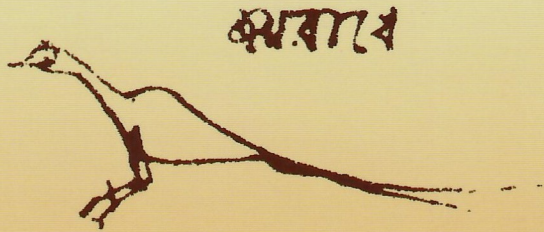


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स्वामीजीविते
शिवगणेश



श्यामायै

Swami Vivekananda's Ideas and Our Times:
A Retrospect on His 150th Birth Anniversary

A Commemorative Volume



Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

An Autonomous Residential College
Declared by UGC as a College with Potential for Excellence



**Swami Vivekananda's Ideas and Our Times:
A Retrospect on His 150th Birth Anniversary**

A Commemorative Volume

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Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira

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Introduction

Sandipan Sen

Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, the maiden step of the Ramakrishna Mission in the field of higher education is itself a living testimony to the visionary ideas of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda had conceived of setting up this 'temple of learning' at Belur Math and named it as the 'Vidyamandira' back in 1898. He expected this institute to become a confluence of the ancient 'Gurukula' tradition of India and the modern educational system of the West. He even outlined a course structure for it, which included grammar, philosophy, science, literature, Sanskrit scriptures, English and other subjects.¹ After a little more than four decades, his unerring vision eventually came to be actualised and this college came into existence in 1941. Now it has become one of the leading academic institutes in India.

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Josephine MacLeod, one of Swami Vivekananda's American 'friends' once said of him: "The thing that held me in Swamiji was his unlimitedness. I never could touch the bottom – or top – or sides. The amazing size of him!"² Now, such a personality hardly ever lends to any categorisation whatsoever. No wonder, Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902) remains a multifaceted personality. He was a dynamic monk, a brilliant exponent of Vedanta philosophy, an ardent social reformer, a gifted orator, an excellent communicator, a trend-setting *littérateur*, an able organiser, an epoch-making leader, a visionary and above all a passionate humanitarian. Commenting on his ideas Rabindranath Tagore had said: "In him everything is positive and nothing negative."³ Besides exploring the relevance of Vivekananda's ideas for our times in general, this volume seeks to focus on three major themes out of the vast array of ideas of this iconic figure of modern India. These are: his philosophical ideas, socio-economic and political ideas, and ideas on art and literature.

Vivekananda was well versed in the different schools of Indian and Western philosophy. He gave a creative bend to the abstract philosophy of the Vedanta with his doctrine of 'Practical Vedanta' to make it practicable for the ordinary man. Whether in

India or abroad his message was loud and clear: that all human beings were essentially equal as they were “potentially divine” and the task before humanity was to “manifest” that divinity.⁴ And for him, this divinity constitutes the finest aspect of human nature which can liberate them from the bounds of narrow selfishness and help them develop to the highest possible extent. Vivekananda revolutionised the ancient Indian monastic tradition by creating a new motto for the monastic Order of Sri Ramakrishna: ‘*atmano moksartham jagaddhitaya ca*’, i.e., ‘for the liberation of the self and the welfare of the world’; thus transforming a reclusive band of selfless men into a ‘catalyst’ for social change. Moreover his message of *accepting*⁵ all religions as true paved the way for evolving mutually agreeable moral standards receptive to the sensitivities of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic world.

Vivekananda was a tireless preacher of positive ideas. Besides his deep philosophical insight he was keenly interested in the finer aspects of life, like art and music. The Sri Ramakrishna temple at Belur Math bears testimony to the rich artistic sense of Vivekananda. He was a trained musician and a talented singer. He had even compiled and co-edited a book on Bengali songs in his youth. As a college

student he had translated and written a critique of Herbert Spencer's book on education, which was later duly acknowledged by Spencer himself.⁶ Later on at Harvard University, Professor John Henry Wright was so impressed with his intelligence and vast erudition that while introducing Vivekananda to the authorities of the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago he wrote: "Here is a man who is more learned than all our learned professors put together."⁷ Indeed, even today the texts of his speeches, his essays, letters and travelogues seem to be very fresh, insightful and inspiring. Particularly his original essays in Bengali are considered as path-breaking. Vivekananda was also quite inquisitive about the latest developments in the field of science and technology. Some of his ideas, like the concept of harmony among the laws governing the macrocosm and the microcosm,⁸ have found a resonance in modern science.

As a mendicant monk Vivekananda travelled all over India and obtained a direct and invaluable understanding of the character and condition of the people of this vast and diverse land. This facilitated his vision of India to be a truly 'pluralistic' one. He used to consider the Indian society as "A veritable ethnological museum!"⁹ For him the "Vedanta brain and Islam body" was "the only hope" for India.¹⁰

Again, his visits to the nations in Asia, Europe and America kept him abreast of the emerging trends in the world at that time, making his ideas liberal, holistic and widely applicable. That is why even though he was very critical of the exploiting nature of British rule in India, he could not forego the benefits of it. Similarly, in spite of being very proud of the ascetic spiritualist tradition of India, he never shied away from praising the practical approach taken by the West towards the problems of daily life. Vivekananda developed a unique perception of world history. His method of understanding of human history was analytical and objective. Based on his own experience and understanding Vivekananda put forward a scheme for the “regeneration” of Indian society.¹¹ He dreamt of a harmonious human civilisation founded on the principle of free exchange of ideas between the East and the West, where every nation would be able to preserve its unique character while at the same time be ready to learn from others.¹² Even today this worldview could help us in finding a common ground between the conflicting demands of localised ‘identity politics’ and the hegemony of a ‘globalised’ world.

Vivekananda was not only a visionary, he was also an able organiser and empathic ‘activist’ to set off

14. "Modern India" (original in Bengali – *Bartaman Bharata*, 1899), *CWSV*, Vol. 4, p. 468
15. See: Letter to Maharaja of Mysore dated 23 June, 1894, *CWSV*, Vol 4, p. 362
16. Letter to E.T. Sturdy dated 9 August, 1895, *CWSV*, Vol. 8, p. 350
17. "India's Mission" (interview with the *Sunday Times*, London, 1896), *CWSV*, Vol. 5, p. 192