

Vivekananda's Impact on the World of Ideas

Ideas travel faster than light and keep orbiting in the astral realm till they find a suitable neural receiver to grow and develop. These ideas do not rest and anyone can crystallize them. Vivekananda's powerful ideas continue to impact humanity and will do so in the future. Like matter that cannot be destroyed but can only be transformed, powerful ideas too do not die.

The prophets live even after their physical death because they are spiritually alive and have a strong identification with the message they have to deliver. Truth never grows old and what the puissant souls speak is nothing but the truth. Vivekananda regarded truth as a 'corrosive substance of infinite power,' which 'burns its way in wherever it falls—in soft substance at once, hard granite slowly, but it must.

Vivekananda, the Prophet

A prophet is 'one who speaks out'. Vivekananda spoke from the higher ranges of the mind and through direct perception could see the coming world problems, which if left unchecked could prove to be dangerous for humanity.

In the West he saw materialism and individualism at its worst—the worship of Shakti through sense gratification—in the East he saw poverty and ignorance masquerading as religion. The mission of resuscitating humanity was his divine calling. 'I know my mission in life, and no chauvinism about me', he wrote to Alasinga; 'I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that. ... What country has any special claim on me? Am I any nation's slave?' In what way did Vivekananda contribute to the world of ideas? He was not a philosopher in the formal sense—like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, or others—nor did he present his ideas through dissertations or peer-reviewed journals to establish his theories. Yet his influence on the world of thought is perceptible from 1893, when he first appeared at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and continues to this day, both in India and abroad. His inspiring and innovative ideas, loaded with the wisdom of ages and fully in tune with the times, entered deep into the psyche of his audiences, some of whom were well known in different walks of life.

A philosopher may be a genius and impact one's area of study even after leaving the mortal coil, but this influence seldom transcends the mind level. One may read Jacob Böhme (1575–1624) or Julien de La Mettrie (1709–51) with interest, but may not view them with worshipful eyes or take their words as scripture. On the other hand, the words of prophets touch the heart and command our respect naturally. The mind of an intellectual person is ensconced in the past or the present, but the prophet is far ahead and transcends time. The genius may have 'the eye of intellect and the wing of thought'⁴, to borrow William G Simm's (1806–70) expression, but a prophet has tremendous insight. A genius may or may not adhere to truth, but the prophet can die for it.

The genius can remain preferably in an idealistic world; the prophet has a mission to fulfil, so is ever on the move. The genius may or may not have the will to do, but the

prophet is goaded by the supreme Will to act. Geniuses sometime deviate from the path of virtue; prophets are virtue incarnate and show light to humankind. Geniuses are known to have suffered from melancholia or insanity—as in the case of Michelangelo (1475–1564) or Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872), among others—a fact validated by philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and psychiatrists like Cesaro Lombroso (1835–1909). Prophets, on the other hand, may have oversensitive nerves but they remain on the track of Being.

The genius loves truth, but the prophet lives it. A genius may just influence a small section of society, but a prophet affects humanity during his lifetime and after. A prophet is a genius but a genius is not always a prophet. In the case of Vivekananda, he had the profundity of an intellectual, the innovativeness of a genius, the purity of a saint, the zeal of a reformer, and the vision of a prophet. Vivekananda's thoughts cannot be seen in quantifiable terms, as these have pervaded all the domains of life—religion, philosophy, art, education, society, politics, and economics.

This essay delineates the impact of some of his ideas as a social and religious thinker and philosopher, as a spiritual humanist, and as one who taught the art and science of living. His ideas are fresh and vibrant and work on the minds of people like an alchemical medium that transforms dross into gold. It is not essential that outpourings of the heart should be always consistent, but they present the truth without adulteration and contain the ardour of a divine soul. To quote Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950): 'And what was Vivekananda?

A radiant glance from the eye of Shiva; but behind him is the divine gaze from which he came and Shiva himself and Brahma and Vishnu and OM—all exceeding.' Though systematization of thought is essential for pedagogy, it takes away the spirit of an idea, which forms its substratum. Vivekananda did not put his thoughts in an ideological crucible—like theism, humanism, collectivism, positivism, or some other—because that which is concretized cannot take a form other than that of the crucible and loses its malleability.

Vivekananda is not to be assessed by his tangible works alone, but by the impact of his invisible spirit, which pervades society to this day. Scholars have interpreted Vivekananda as per their mental makeup, as a cyclonic Hindu monk, a patriot, a paragon of Vedanta, an awakener of souls, a social reformer, a saviour of Hinduism, and so on. But this does not explain the vastness of his mind, the glory of his spirit, or the quantum of his contribution to humanity. To quote Sri Aurobindo again: Vivekananda was a soul of puissance if ever there was one, a very lion among men, but the definite work he has left behind is quite incommensurate with our impression of his creative might and energy.

We perceive his influence still working gigantically, we know not well how, we know not well where, in something that is not yet formed, something leonine, grand, intuitive, upheaving that has entered the soul of India and we say, 'Behold, Vivekananda still lives in the soul of his Mother and in the souls of her children' (17.332). Many ideas first expressed by Vivekananda through his speeches and writings were developed by later

Indian thinkers, some of whom impacted world thought and culture. Mahatma Gandhi's (1872–1950) concept of ends and means and of trusteeship, Sri Aurobindo's notion of freedom, education, and Integral Yoga, Jawaharlal Nehru's (1889–1964) belief in the fundamental unity of India, and Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) vision of the universal man echo Vivekananda's ideas. The social and religious zeal of Sister Nivedita (1867–1911), the neo-Vedanta of Swami Ramatirtha (1873–1906), the patriotic fervour of Netaji Subhaschandra Bose (1897–1945), and many others were ignited by Vivekananda's writings. Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) was deeply touched by Swamiji's defence of Hinduism.

Some of Tagore's immortal lines—like 'if the world passes on in tears how could I sit alone pursuing my own salvation'—reflect the influence of Vivekananda. Another popular poem of Tagore says that God is not in 'chanting and singing and telling of beads' but is present 'where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones,' comes close to Vivekananda's observation that 'devotion to duty is the highest form of the worship of God'. Tagore felt that Vivekananda's 'gospel marked the awakening of man in his fullness and that is why it inspired our youth to the diverse courses of liberation through work and sacrifice.' He suggested that 'if you want to know India, study Vivekananda. In him everything is positive and nothing negative'.

Vivekananda and Gandhi

The idea that good means should be employed to achieve the end, normally attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, originally came from Vivekananda, as can be seen from his lecture 'Work and Its Secret', delivered at Los Angeles, California, on 4 January 1900: 'One of the greatest lessons I have learnt in my life is to pay as much attention to the means of work as to its end. ... With the means all right, the end must come. We forget that it is the cause that produces the effect. ...

The means are the cause: attention to the means, therefore, is the secret of life.' There is every possibility that Gandhi took a cue from Vivekananda's views on untouchability. His remark that Hinduism today consists 'merely in "eating" and "not eating"' reminds one of Vivekananda's well-known observation that he made in reply to the 'Address of Welcome' at Manamadurai: 'Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is the cooking-pot.' Also these remarks of Swamiji are on the same line: 'The religion of India at present is "Don't-touchism"' (5.222). 'As long as *touch-me-not-ism* is your creed and the kitchen-pot your deity, you cannot rise spiritually' (5.267). Vivekananda's advice was to 'kick such customs out!' He demanded: 'Unless the blood circulates over the whole body, has any country risen at any time?' (7.246). Compare this to Gandhi's observation: 'Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom nor get it, if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability.'

The term 'Don't-touchism' coined by Vivekananda continued to be used by social reformers and nationalists in the pre-independence period till the practice of untouchability was legally abolished by the Indian Constitution in 1950. Long before Gandhi evolved his concept of trusteeship with an egalitarian perspective, Vivekananda had suggested that one should hold money 'as custodian for what is God's'.

This is in accord with the *Isha Upanishad*: ‘*Ma gridha kasya svid dhanam*; do not covet the wealth of others.’ Gandhi’s ardent belief in ahimsa in thought, word, and deed—though derived from many sources—can also be traced to Vivekananda, who said: ‘There is no virtue higher than non-injury. There is no happiness higher than what a man obtains by this attitude of non-offensiveness to all creation.’ ‘To injure another creates bondage and hides the truth’ (7.68). Gandhi described fearlessness as the first requisite of spirituality, a point that forms the core of Vivekananda’s concept of man-making. The similarity is further revealed in their description of cowardice. While Vivekananda observed: ‘cowardice is no virtue’ (5.86), Gandhi wrote: ‘Cowardice is the greatest vice.’ Like Vivekananda, Gandhi described religion as Self-realization. Again, like him, he believed in the essential unity of all religions.

His view that ‘each religion has its own contribution to make to human evolution’ reminds one of Vivekananda, who said that all religions are ‘different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind’. Gandhi’s observation that ‘the soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms’ seems to be a borrowing from Vivekananda, who wrote: ‘Every religion has a soul behind it, and that soul may differ from the soul of another religion.’

A parallel can also be drawn between Gandhi’s concept of education, which aimed at ‘the development of the mind, body and soul’, with what Vivekananda observed: ‘We want to become harmonious beings, with the psychical, spiritual, intellectual, and working (active) sides of our nature equally developed.’ Gandhi’s love and concern for the masses also reminds one of the great swami. But Gandhi went a step ahead, crystallizing his love into *sarvodaya*, welfare of all; patriotism into *svaraj*, self-rule; and ahimsa, non-violence, into *satyagraha*, call to truth.

Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo, the mystic philosopher, acknowledged the invisible influence of Vivekananda on him in one of his letters to Motilal Roy, sometime in 1913: ‘Vivekananda in the Alipore Jail gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our *Sadhana*.’ He believed that Vivekananda was an awakened soul, who had the ‘supreme experience of the Self’ as described in the Upanishads. He was convinced that Sri Ramakrishna wanted him to be ‘a great power for changing the world-mind in a spiritual direction’ (22.150).

In *The Synthesis of Yoga* Sri Aurobindo quotes from Vivekananda’s letter, in which Swamiji says that he has lost all wish for personal salvation and would like to be born again and again to take away the miseries of people. Vivekananda’s yoga, he said, is not limited to the realization of the Transcendent by the individual soul, ‘it embraces also the realization of the Universal—“the sum total of all souls”—and cannot therefore be confined to the movement of a personal salvation and escape. Even in his transcendence of cosmic limitations he is still one with all in God; a divine work remains for him in the universe’ (20.257–58). Sri Aurobindo noted that the philosophy of Vedanta and yoga have ‘exceeded their Asiatic limit’, and were impacting the life of people in America and Europe; ‘the ideas have long been filtering into western thought by a hundred indirect channels’ (3.344–5). He felt that the work of the Theosophical Society and the appearance

of Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions had 'put the seal on Hindu revival by rousing its self-assertive power vis-a-vis 'the materialized mentality of the occident' (14.14). Referring to the impact of Vivekananda in the context of a session of the Indian National Congress

in London, Sri Aurobindo observed that Vivekananda's sojourn to the US, followed by the work of other swamis, did more for India than a hundred London Congresses could affect. It is natural that Sri Aurobindo, who held Vivekananda in great esteem and recognized his 'divine work', should have been influenced by his ideas, consciously or unconsciously. His

concept of freedom has its premise in Vivekananda's view that the whole universe, in its constant motion, represents the dominant quest for freedom: 'In freedom it rises, in freedom it rests, and into freedom it melts away' (2.125). His nationalism, like that of Vivekananda's, had a spiritual orientation, and his view of India as mother, as Bharata-Shakti, and not as a mere geographic expression, reminds one of Vivekananda's description of India as 'the blessed Punya Bhumi'—sacred land—'the land of introspection and of spirituality.' Sri Aurobindo's view that each nation is a Shakti 'of the evolving spirit in humanity, and lives by the principle which it embodies' is similar to that of Vivekananda, who wrote: 'In each nation, as in music, there is a main note,

a central theme, upon which all others turn.' Both evinced interest in India's rehabilitation from a subject state, so that the country could fulfill its natural destiny of being the world leader in spirituality. Both provided a spiritual foundation to the concept of the unity of humankind and stressed on the deeper dimensions of life. Both relied on reasoning, thought, and intuition to explore the world of knowledge. There is a clear imprint of Vivekananda on Sri Aurobindo's concept of Integral Yoga, which aims at awakening in humans 'the dynamic divine potential' through concentration of mind, and other techniques. 'By this Yoga we not only seek the Infinite, but we call upon the Infinite to unfold himself in human life,' wrote Sri Aurobindo.

Basing his views on Vivekananda, whom he quotes in this context, he argues that 'the perfection of the Integral Yoga will come when each man is able to follow his own path of Yoga, pursuing the development of his own nature in its upsurging towards that which transcends the nature. For freedom is the final law and the last consummation' (20.51). Compare this sentence with Vivekananda's observation: 'Infinite divided by infinite, added to infinite, multiplied by infinite (remains) infinite. You are infinite. ...

The infinite can never be made finite. You are never bound.' Sri Aurobindo's educational ideas were also influenced by Vivekananda. *In the Hour of God and other Writings* he says: 'The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or task-master; he is a helper and a guide.' Compare this to what Vivekananda said: 'The teacher spoils everything by thinking that he is teaching. ... Within man is all knowledge ... and it requires only an awakening, and that much is the work of a teacher.' Again, like Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo disapproved of the concept of hammering the child into shape as desired by many parents or teachers. His view that education should help 'the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use' reminds one of Vivekananda who observed: 'Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man.'

