



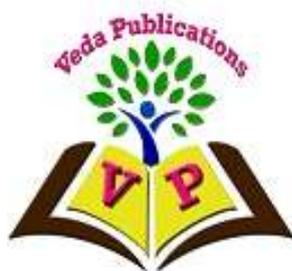
THE TORCH-BEARERS OF MULTI-CULTURES AND REFORMATION IN INDIA: RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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ABSTRACT



The present paper is devoted to compare the prose works – speeches, letters, lectures, and conversations, interviews – of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. The notions of Multi – Cultures and Reformation in India in the prose works of Tagore and Swami Vivekananda are taken in this paper. Literary articles, previous research works and papers published in various magazines obtained from different sources i.e. internet archive, digital library of India, infolibnet, printed books, etc. are the secondary data of the research paper.

Keywords: *Multi-Cultures – Reformation- Nationalism- Universalism- ideological poverty*



The time was out of joint when Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda entered onto the stage of the world. The overall scenario, both in India and in the World, was grim to the extreme. While India had sunk deep in the darkness of both material and ideological poverty, had stood confused at the awe of the dazzling Western civilization, had forgotten her spiritual roots and lost itself in the wilderness of degeneration, the West, on the other hand, was losing its spirit to the striking material progress which led to imperialistic enterprises, subjection of the foreign lands, exploitation and strong religious dogmatism that developed racial fanaticism and bigotry. At this hour of stagnation, Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda along with other noble souls who strived to regain the blissful seat for humanity, came onto this beautiful planet, toiled to the utmost in rendering their contribution for the regeneration of India, the restoration of dignity of man and unity of different races, various cultures and nations with all their variations, however variant may be.

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the outstanding personalities who strived to alter the face of their motherland, wrote wonderful and untiring prose. His prose reflects his feeling, frankness, sense of balance and tolerance. He always brooded over the problems of his motherland and tried to find possible answers for them. As a poet he enlightened his age, revitalised his people mentally and morally, created amazing literary forms, dwelt upon all the genres of literature except the epic and produced songs which would echo each aspect of his country's nature and every undulation of the human heart. As a reformer, he was the first to venture into rural reconstruction and educational reformation in his country. He was an exceptionally prolific writer in his mother tongue Bengali. At an advanced age, Tagore intended to spread his voice to a larger humanity and therefore, heroically he turned himself into a bilingual writer. Tagore's prose reflects his inward and outward to evolve solutions to the predicaments of his motherland. Written in reasoned passion, his English prose is rich in thought and feeling. In spite of being a poet and writer primarily in Bengali, Tagore produced about 40 per cent of his writings in English which reflects his urge to reach the world. His English prose

revealing his universalism, broadmindedness and farsightedness has been broadening the horizons for penetrating his tremendous ideas globally.

Swami Vivekananda, an impressive gifted orator, one of the foremost thinkers of the world, the greatest mystic of his times, the greatest interpreter of the sublime ideas of the Vedanta philosophy, the ablest champion of the Practical Vedanta and a spiritual humanist wrote on a variety of subjects – spirituality, religion, condition of the downtrodden, poverty, yoga, meditation, nationalism, internationalism, ideal state, education, predicament of woman, problems of India, regeneration of India and on his own guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He occupies a unique position in the history of Indian English Prose as a writer of prose of social thought and spirituality. His works – speeches and lectures delivered in India and abroad, interviews, talks, discussions and articles to magazines – extend to as many as nine volumes which were published by the Advaita Ashrama. Whatever Swami Vivekananda pronounced is endowed with sincerity, uncommon force, deep emotion and warmth of feeling. The thoughts that he present in his works reveal his convincing manner, his logical and rational power, his impressive nature, his imaginative and creative faculty. His rational mind not only separated true religious ideals from the heap of superstitious dogmas and brought down the Philosophy of Vedanta from the exclusive possession of a few to the reach of the common man. Being a staunch humanist, he always stood for the poor and the exploited. He had enviable command on English language which had been the dress of his powerful thoughts and feeling for the elevation of humanity. His English is clear, spontaneous, lucid, eloquent and rhythmic. Endowed with a rare combination of head and heart, each and every line that he pronounced reflects his tremendous personality. As an interpreter of Indian thought and ethos, Swami Vivekananda has occupied a pivotal place among the unrivalled masters of Indian English Prose.

Both Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda produced voluminously in English prose though their prose works have been overshadowed and thus not obtained required consideration due to the overwhelming popularity of Tagore as a poet and



playwright and the tremendous popularity of Vivekananda as a Hindu monk. Their speeches and writings, firmly grounded in the Indian ethos, are imbued with humanism, spirituality, mysticism and radiant rationality preaching the gospel of universal harmony. A scan of the prose writings of these two authors reveals them as the torch-bears of multi-cultures and reformation in India.

Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda had firsthand experience of the predicament of the poor in their motherland. It was during his stay at Shelidah that Rabindranath Tagore had a deeper insight on the life of the common people, their daily drudgery and constant struggle against the freaks of nature. In case of Swami Vivekananda it was his father's death that forced him to understand the grim reality of the world. Both held that the downtrodden had been bullied and exploited at every level due to their ignorance. They asseverated that the regeneration of the country would not be materialised until the masses were well-educated and well-placed in society. They plunged into reality to help the poor. Tagore, besides assisting the poor of his ancestors' land when he was looking after his estate, found education as the weapon to fight against poverty and established an institution to impart education to the needy. Swami Vivekananda, in the similar lines, formed the Ramakrishan Mission, an order of missionary monks and directed that they had to dedicate their lives to the worship of God, not in temples, but in *daridranarayana*, the poorest of the poor.

Similarly, they exhibited uncontrollable detest against untouchability which had been a carbuncle, corrupt blood in Indian Hindu society. Tagore appealed to his countrymen to root out the outgrowth from their neighbourhood with heroic efforts. Swami Vivekananda, in the same way, not only exhorted his countrymen to eradicate the evil practice but he himself gave a deathblow to the orthodox Hindu people of his times by initiating many untouchables into Gayatri mantra and investing them with the sacred thread on the birthday of Sri Ramakrishana Paramahansa .

Both Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda could not bear the suffering of their fellow beings. When plague broke out in Calcutta,

they readily responded and extended their helping hands to the victims with uncommon speed. Rabindranath Tagore rendered his active hand in service by assisting Sister Nivedita in organising relief and medical camps for victims. Equally praiseworthy were Rabindranath's services to his tenants at Shelidah. The judiciary system he set up, during 1890's, on the estates received unique recognition from the government and protected the tenants against police callousness and corruption.

Both Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda chose the western principle of organisation to materialise their work. They not only initiated their schemes but also turned every stone to see that they would accomplish their respective goals. On 22 December 1901, Shantiniketan was started with five teachers and five pupils, among them Rabindranath's eldest son. Rabindranath named it Brahmacharya Ashram. In the similar way Swami Vivekananda, on 1st May 1897, in a meeting of all the monastic and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna convened at Balaram babu's house, he propounded the establishment of the **Ramakrishna Mission**. The aims and objectives and the guiding principles were resolved at the second meeting held on 5th May. In addition to the literary excellence, Rabindranath jumped into the fray of Nationalist agitation more than once. He raised his voice against the repressive policy of the government when the Sedition Bill was passed in 1898 and actively participated in raising funds for Tilak's defence. When Bengal was divided in 1905, he once again jumped into the fray, making fiery speeches, composing patriotic songs and leading huge processions against partition. In March 1917, he made a public protest against the internment of Annie Besant by the Madras Government. At the end of the year on the opening day of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta session, he recited a long poem which came to be known as 'India's Prayer'. Being a sensitive soul, Tagore could not bear the merciless killing of unarmed crowd at Jalianwalla Bagh at Amritsar. On 29 May, he wrote a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford resigning his knighthood, a protest which his countrymen never ceased to be grateful for.



Though he disagreed with Mahatma Gandhi in spinning and charkha, on 4 January 1932, when Mahatma Gandhi was arrested on his return to India from London after participating in the Round Table conference, Rabindranath Tagore sent a cable to the British Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, condemning, “. . . the policy of indiscriminate repression . . . causing permanent alienation of our people from yours” (qtd. in Kripalani 355). When the news of Mahatma Gandhi's fast unto death against the Communal Award, a permanent vivisection of the Hindu community by giving independent status to the 'untouchable', Tagore congratulating Mahatma's heroic stand stated, “it is well worth sacrificing precious life for the sake of India's unity and her social integrity” (qtd. in Kripalani 363). He also appealed the people to support Mahatma by removing all traces of caste prejudice from their society. On 24 September, Tagore left for Poona to visit the Mahatma in Yeravada Jail and the fast was broken by Gandhi on 26th, when Tagore was by his bedside. But at the same time, he openly condemned the statement of Mahatma considering the earthquake in Bihar on 15 January 1934 as a divine chastisement for the sin of untouchability.

Swami Vivekananda, though never involved in the National movement, strived for the betterment of his country in his own way. He did not cross his forty and live long like his counterpart, Rabindranath Tagore, to witness the crisis through which his country passed. Therefore, his involvement or reaction to this turmoil is unimaginable. But it can be gainsaid that his forte was not politics but religion, reformation, service and uplift of the poor of his country. It was to find a solution to the problems of his motherland that he wished to visit the West and participate in the Parliament of Religions. When the subscription committee was formed by his disciples and devotees in Madras to collect money for his great journey of the West, he stressed that money should be collected from the masses and stated, “it is for the people of India that I am going to the West – for the people and the poor!” (qtd. in Eastern and Western Disciples 379). In December 1901, some of the leaders of Indian National Congress who had come to Calcutta Session, visited Swami Vivekananda and had discussions with him. In the words of one

delegate, “(these sessions were) of a type even superior and more beneficial to those present than the actual sessions of the Congress” (qtd. in Gautam Ghosh 132).

Like Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda was also an international thinker who had cared for the welfare of the entire humanity. In his very first address of the Parliament of Religions, 'Sisters and Brothers of America', itself he included the people of the East and the West in his universal mission. The same widespread notion is found in his future plans that he devised even before landing in India, “We will begin with these three centres (Calcutta, Madras and Mayavathi), and later on we will get to Bombay and Allahabad. And from these points, if the Lord is pleased, we will invade not only India, but send bands of preachers to every country in the world” (qtd. in Gautam Ghosh 78). Both Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda visited a number of foreign countries not only to materialise their mission but to propagate their convictions. While Rabindranath Tagore went abroad several times, Swami Vivekananda left his mother land twice only.

Tagore and Swami Vivekananda, therefore, strived to enlighten the people on the inevitability of breaking down the walls of separation among various nations, races and cultures and on the necessity of marching towards one world and humanity. But they never advocated for unity or monotony i.e. one world religion or one world culture. They detested sameness and perceived well the rich tapestry that nature had been clad to sooth humanity with its variety. So, they did not plea for dead unity but mingling of various nations, cultures and races without losing their individual traits. Universalism, for them, was not eliminating the individual aspects of various nations but in recognising them and in extending hospitality to others, however different, strange and dissimilar their customs and cultures might be.

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