

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Narendranath Datta was born on July 12, 1863 in Calcutta, India. His father was Vishwanath Datta, who was an attorney in the Calcutta High Court, while his mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was an intelligent and pious woman. His biographers tend to portray him in superlatives; according to these accounts, his early education began from home and had him learning Bengali, English and Sanskrit before he joined the Metropolitan Institution at the age of 7 (Arora 2). There he began to develop into a genius while still finding time to pursue other hobbies such as rowing, swimming and classical Indian music (Sil 29). As he grew so did his exceptional thirst for knowledge and it propelled him to the post-secondary institutions of Presidency College and the General Assembly's Institution, where he originally had his sights set on becoming a barrister (Gokhale 36). But in 1881 Naren's life would change forever as he joined the Brahma Samaj Society and met Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The Brahma Samaj was a movement of universalism that supported the religion of humanity and attempted to synthesize ideas from the East and West. It also protested against aspects within Hinduism, such as the caste system, polytheism and idol worship (Arora 4). Once a part of this group Naren met Ramakrishna for the first time where they began a close relationship. Naren became Ramakrishna's favourite disciple which drew him into a world of religion as opposed to a world of law. This movement into religious thought had Naren by Ramakrishna's side until his death in 1886, where he then took it upon himself to act in the name of the late Ramakrishna and spread his philosophies to a wider audience (Schneiderman 64). This was a challenging task considering just two years prior Naren's father died suddenly of heart disease and left the family in extreme debt (Arora 6). But Naren progressed.

He continued to devote himself to the order of monks that were assembled by Ramakrishna before his death. Datta, their leader, encouraged an inner spiritual life but an external program of humanitarian and cultural activities (Arora 9). It would later be the basis for the Ramakrishna order. But before the Order was assembled Naren and his supporters moved to Baranagore to live in an alleged “haunted house” where they could practice their ascetic way of life (Sil 47). The dilapidated building was one of the few places that they could afford after the death of their famous teacher. But Narendra was only there for a brief period of time, as he would soon take up renunciation and roam through all of India, and eventually most of the world. He began a now renowned two-year journey throughout India in February of 1891, spanning from Varanasi and Mumbai to the Himalayas. Along his journeys Narendra changed his name on several occasions before settling on his final monastic name of Swami Vivekananda in the city of Khetri (Arora 12). Although he went by a new alias, Vivekananda continued to promote acceptance of the Vedanta, the spread of patriotism, and the acceptance of a harmony among different religious affiliations (Sil 52). He planned to carry on these teachings after his two-year trip by attending the Parliament of Religions meeting in Chicago in the fall of 1893.

While travelling to the United States, Vivekananda chose to pursue new experiences in countries like Japan, China, and Canada. Once he arrived he ran into the obstacle of not being registered as a delegate to take part in the Parliament, but with his charismatic personality and overt intelligence he befriended professors on the committee who chose the delegates (Arora13). In a short time he was recommended to be a speaker. When Vivekananda spoke he was not representing any specific religion or sect, he was representing India (Arora 14). In the words of some bibliographers he was able to take all of the scholars and religious men to a place they had

never been, where his words connected all religions and articulated the “oneness” of God and creed.

“if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time, which will be infinite like the God it will preach . . . which will not be Brahmanic, the Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these and still have infinite space for development.” (Teelucksingh 412).

Vivekananda’s words of wisdom evidently captivated many people, and he was asked, and agreed, to speak all across the United States and England. After three years of touring he finally returned to India in 1897, where he received a grand reception. Upon his arrival he called together his many disciples to complete the creation of a philanthropic association called the Ramakrishna Order, named after his main mentor (Gokhale 37). It is the combination of twin groups called the Ramakrishna Math and Mission which were initially established to combat the major issues in India, such as illiteracy, inequality among classes, female education, the economy, and cultural synthesis (Arora 19). The Math began in Barangore when the disciples of the dead Ramakrishna started their own monastic group before Narendranath Datta became the well-renowned Swami Vivekananda. But in 1897 the Mission was formed and eventually merged to create one great organization. Presently extensions of the group can be found all across the world; their main objectives continue to exist and are now present in more than the just Indian culture.

In 1899 Vivekananda left for the West again but was only gone for approximately a year, and upon his return he was stricken with illness that lasted for almost two years. Then suddenly in July of 1902 he passed away at the very young age of 39 (Miller 121). His life was short but

focused, so he managed to express his and Ramakrishna's views of the world. He continues to be recognized for his love of knowledge and religion. This enabled him to immerse himself in the *sruti* [divinely heard or revealed] literature of the Vedas and *Upanisads*, while still mastering other things such as Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The lectures he gave in India and around the world about Vedanta and Yoga stressed concepts that were absent in the modern world and helped to change preconceived notions of India that were held in the West (Teelucksingh 415). Vivekananda's philosophies were used by future figureheads in India such as Gandhi and allowed them to act as ambassadors of India. Therefore, it can be assumed that his teachings played a significant role in India's struggle for independence, and that it received an improved appraisal from the rest of the globe (Teelucksingh 417).

References and Recommended Readings

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Related Research Topics

- Ramakrishna Order
- Brahma Samaj
- Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa
- Parliament of World Religions
- Vedanta
- Yoga Sutras
- Bhagavad Gita
- Patanjali

Notable Websites

- <http://www.thebrahmosamaj.net/>
- <http://www.ramakrishna.org/index.htm>
- <http://www.belurmath.org/swamivivekananda.htm>
- <http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/>
- <http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swami_Vivekananda

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