CHAPTER II

FORMATION OF THE APPROACH: ROLE OF THE FAMILY

The orientations one receives in one’s family in the early years of one’s life leave an impact on the approach to life and the world that one develops later in life. In the light of such a proposition, this chapter gives an account of the orientations Swami Vivekananda received in his family – from his grandparents (both paternal and maternal) and parents in his early life - that helped him to formulate his approach to human development in his later life.

I

One who would shake the world as Swami Vivekananda was born as Narendranath Datta on January 12, 1863 – the very auspicious Makar Sankranti day, the last day of the Bengali month Poush – in the Datta family of Simulia in North Calcutta. The Datta family hailed originally from a village by the name of Datta Dariatona that was located in the Kalna sub-division of the district of Burdwan. Rammohan Datta, the great grandfather of Narendranath, built a grand house at Gourmohan Mukherjee lane in Simulia where Narendranath was born. Rammohan was a ‘Farsi Lawyer’ – a lawyer versed in Persian – who served as an assistant to an English attorney practicing in the Supreme Court at Calcutta. Rammohan’s son, Durgaprasad, the grandfather of Narendranath, well versed, like his father in Persian as also in Sanskrit, also took to the profession of law, being connected to an attorney’s firm. “But he had such a strong leaning towards monastic life that after the birth of a son in 1835 he renounced the world, becoming a monk at the age of twenty-five, and was not heard of by any member of the family until the twelve years of spiritual practices prescribed by monastic rule had been completed”. It was later heard of Durgaprasad that he had become the head of a monastery at Varanasi. An interesting
incident in the life of Durgaprasad should be mentioned to indicate the strength of mind and quality of character of the man in terms of his steadfastness in the sannyasa that he took to. Durgaprasad would come to Calcutta in his new identity on annual pilgrimages to the Sagar Island and would stay in the house of his Bhiksha-putra, which was nearby to the ancestral house of the Dattas. During one such visit and stay in the house of his Bhiksha-putra, Durgaprasad was forcibly taken to his ancestral house by his relatives and put in a room on the assumption that contact with his wife and son and other relatives would make him change his mind and bring him back to the worldly life. The room in which Durgaprasad was kept was locked from outside in order to prevent him from leaving without notice. Despite all cajoling however, Durgaprasad refused to take even a morsel of food, during the period of his confinement and groaned so much during this period that he began to foam at the mouth and apprehending his death, the elders among his relatives set him free. Durgaprasad could never be made to set his foot in this house again.

Indeed, so strong and unwavering was Durgaprasad’s commitment to his life as a monk that on one of his pilgrimages to Varanasi, he once met by chance his wife Shyamasundari when she slipped on the road leading to the temple of the lord Vishwanath, losing consciousness in the process and Durgaprasad, the passing monk, not knowing that it was actually his wife Shyamasundari, lifted her up only to leave her alone the very next instant he knew who she actually was. Worldly attachments were not for Durgaprasad and his wife accepted this fact gracefully. There is thus validity in the observation that “She, as well as he, had renounced”.

Family traits and tendencies, says the modern gene theory, never get lost. They recur in the family line. If that is true, then renunciation was in the blood of Vivekananda. As the Eastern and Western disciples of Vivekananda in their account of his life assert:

In striving to account for the exceptional genius of Swami Vivekananda, one must not lose sight of the impressive figure of his grandfather, the man who
deemed the world well lost in his search for God. Vivekananda’s pronounced tendency towards the monastic life was “in his blood” – as we say to explain those inexplicable outcroppings of family traits and tendencies that are at times so remarkable that, in order to satisfy ourselves, we must accept either the theory of reincarnation or that of heredity.⁴

Another biographer observes in the same vein:

Narendra bore a striking resemblance to the grandfather who had renounced the world to lead a monastic life and many thought that the latter had been reborn in him.⁵

That renunciation was running in the blood of Vivekananda could be seen from the renunciating and humanistic tendencies that he exhibited right from his childhood. To quote the last-mentioned biography:

The youngster developed a special fancy for wandering monks, whose very sight would greatly excite him. One day when such a monk appeared at the door and asked for alms, Narendranath gave him his only possession, the tiny piece of new cloth that was wrapped around his waist. Thereafter, whenever a monk was seen in the neighbourhood, Narendra would be locked in a room. But even then he would throw out of the window whatever he found near at hand as an offering to the holy man.⁶

If the renouncing grandfather had given Narendranath the tendency towards a renouncing life, his grandmother Shyamasundari, fearless in accepting the responsibility of bringing up a child, left to her care by a renouncing husband, gave Narendranath the trait of fearlessness. ‘Be strong and fearless in accepting life and in never running away from it’ was a constant refrain of Swami Vivekananda in the Manliness approach to human development that he developed later in life.
Swami Vivekananda’s inheritance from his maternal grandfather Nandalal was scientific rationalism and daring to expose those who cheated people. Nandalal’s daring which underscored his rational-scientific approach to life is best seen in the incident described below.

There was a man in Nandalal’s locality who claimed that he could raise ghosts in a certain house of ghosts and that the ghosts could give ‘cure’ to people for their ailments. On the appointed evening Nandalal offered the ‘raised ghost’ a bowl of milk-rice mixing some chemical with it that was to produce a terrible effect on the person taking the milk-rice and prayed with reverence for the cure to his ‘ailment’. As soon as the ‘ghost’ ate the contents of the bowl, it began reacting with violent sound of retching which led to the catching of the ghost and to the discovery that “the ghost was none other than someone familiar in the neighbourhood who in collusion with another man conducted the lucrative business of raising ghosts and cheating the credulous”. Like the case cited here, Swami Vivekananda all through his life led a fight against all irrational and mercenary approaches to religion and other things in life, seeking to make men see ‘reason’ and science in all things and thus develop themselves. Referring particularly to belief in ghosts as also in the auguries of birds, monkeys and soothsayers, Swamiji regretted that the place of religion was taken by these “creepy things that paralyse the brain” and worked heart and soul to restore religion to its rightful role in the making of man.

Two things stand about Raghumani Devi, the maternal grandmother of Vivekananda: her devoutness and her large-heartedness. A devout Vaishnava who was a voracious reader of the Puranas (mythological tales) and Srimad Bhagavata, she looked upon Goodwin, the English disciple-cum-stenographer of Vivekananda, as a good Vaishnava when he, in the company of Vivekananda, came to visit her in her residence in Calcutta in 1896. Bhupendranath observes, “Her realization that Goodwin could be considered a Vaishnava reminds one of the description to be found in Narada Bhakti Sutras: “In them there is no distinction based on caste or culture, beauty or
birth, wealth or profession…”

No wonder that Vivekananda, the grandson of such a noble lady, became in the fullness of time the preacher of the spiritual equality of all souls.

Deeply religious in temperament, Raghumani Devi was large-hearted, too. She gave shelter in her own house to her widowed daughter Bhubaneshwari and grandchildren including Narendranath (Vivekananda) after they were thrown out, in the wake of Vishwanath’s (Vivekananda’s father) death, from their ancestral house at Simulia. She sold four cottahs of land she owned at Balaram Dey Street in Calcutta in order to enable them to fight the law-suit that the evicting relatives headed by a wicked aunt brought against them. If Swami Vivekananda’s universal heart melted and wept at the misery of all the deprived people of the world, the root could be traced in the experiences he had undergone in his formative years within the setting of his own family.

II

In this section we will see what kind of formative orientations Vivekananda had received from his parents.

Vivekananda’s mother Bhubaneshwari was deeply religious in nature. For two years before Vivekananda’s birth, she kept fasting and praying to Lord Vireshwar Shiva of Varanasi, making herself pure and holy in order to have a pure child like Vivekananda. And when the child was finally born to her she gave the child the name of the god Himself – Vireshwar (literally, ‘the Hero-God’). The family however named the child as Narendranath (the Lord of men) – both the names being eminently justified in the future life of Vivekananda in this that he proved himself to be both a leader of men and a man who made gods of men. “He was marked from birth to be leader of men, as his name Narendra (lord of men) signified”, observes Nikhilananda. And speaking of him, Romain Rolland too notes that the greatest thing about him was his kingliness – a man who, consistent with his philosophy of man, never showed any sense of subordination, weakness, any trace of inferiority to
anybody, however high or mighty he or she was. To quote Rolland, “But his pre-
eminent characteristic was kinglyness. He was a born King and nobody ever came near
him either in India or America without praying homage to his majesty.”

Vivekananda, called Bileh or Naren for short during his childhood was a boy
of energy unlimited and it was a hard task for his mother to keep the exuberant energy
of this basically good-natured but restless boy in check. She however found a solution
to this problem: if the boy would go too far in expressing his childish fancies, she
would simply pour out a pail of water on the head of the boy uttering Shiva! Shiva!
and instantaneously the boy would be quiet. Reminiscing on the young Vivekananda
in her old age to some of the Western disciples of Vivekananda, a very affectionate
Bhubaneshwari, very legitimately proud of her son, would say jokingly that she
prayed to Shiva for a son and He sent instead one of His Demons!

Bhubaneshwari was the first teacher of her child, teaching young Vivekananda
the Bengali alphabet as also the first words of English. She would tell the boy the
stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The heroic struggles of Rama would
so impress the young boy that he would buy the clay images of Rama and Sita, install
them in a secluded corner of a room on the roof of the house and worship them with
flowers and garlands. His Rama-worship however came to an end when the coachman
of the family, a very special friend of him in his childhood (he would adore his head-
gear, livery and the whip with which he would make way for the horses), told him that
marriage was such a bondage in life that anyone who courted such a bondage could
not be a hero worthy of worship. This created a crisis in the mind of the young boy
and none could resolve that for him except the mother at whose knee he heard the tales
of gods and goddesses. The mother told the boy, ‘why, there was Shiva to worship’
and it was such a relief to the young boy. Shiva was the god of renunciation and with
the monastic tendency that was always there in the boy, he immediately took to the
worship of Shiva.

Two things followed immediately thereafter. First, having noted the image of
Shiva and having known from the mother that Shiva was the god of renunciation, the
boy would imitate Him in putting on just a piece of ochre loin-cloth and in moving about the house with the cry ‘I am Shiva! Look, I am Shiva!’18 echoing the great Shankaracharya who, hundreds of years before the cry of the young Vivekananda, pronounced before the world the Vedanta philosophy to this effect that every human soul was Shiva – ‘Shivoham! Shivoham!’

The second thing was the habit of meditation that the child had since developed. He would sit before the image of Shiva in meditation so deep that he would lose sense of all outer things.19 Not even a cobra would be able to rouse him on such occasions. Such a thing happened on one evening when young Vivekananda drafted some boys of the neighbourhood to sit in meditation with him in the worship-hall of their house. Suddenly, a big cobra with its hood spread was seen to be gliding across the floor. The other boys ran away, not Vivekananda. Fortunately, the cobra went away on its own and the anxious parents of Vivekananda asked him as to why he, too, did not run for safety. The answer the child gave is typical of the depth of meditation and the bliss that ensued from it: “I knew nothing of the snake or of anything else; I was feeling inexpressible bliss.”20 No wonder that a boy such as this – the child of a saintly mother- would preach to humanity afterwards the glory of supersensuous life and the inexpressible bliss that follows from the pursuit of such a life.

Bhubaneshwari gave her child another education which stuck to him during the rest of his life. His teacher of geography unfairly treated the boy in his school, even though the boy and not the teacher was correct on a question of geography. To this complaint, Bhubaneshwari taught him that he should in any case hold on to the truth even if the consequences were unpleasant. This teaching of the mother to hold aloft moral standards always and in the face of adverse circumstances stayed with Vivekananda, making him pronounce later that ‘all things could be and should be abandoned for the sake of truth, but never truth for the sake of anything in this world.’ His own addition to the moral precept taught by his mother was that truth must be experienced before being preached. One must find it out oneself before preaching it to others.
An incident in the life of young Vivekananda should be related here to indicate at once his fearless and rational approach to truth. He used to climb a Champaka tree belonging to a neighbour for plucking the flowers of the tree as also for dangling from the tree head down.\textsuperscript{21} It was one of his boyish pranks and he used to do it for fun. With the other boys of the neighbourhood following Vivekananda in climbing the tree, the concerned owner warned the boys that the tree was inhabited by a white-bearded ghost and that the ghost was likely to wring the neck of the boys if it felt disturbed by them. The boys panicked and expressed their disinclination to Vivekananda to climb the tree in future to which Vivekananda laughed and told them that if that was the truth then Vivekananda’s neck would not have been in its place which meant that the owner of the tree was not telling the truth. Having said so, he uttered these words which expressed his future stand on truth most vividly: “Don’t believe what others say unless you yourselves know it to be true”.\textsuperscript{22} “These simple but bold words,” as Nikhilananda observes very perceptively, “were an indication of his future message to the world. Addressing large audiences in later years he would often say: “Do not believe in a thing because you have read about it in a book. Do not believe in a thing because another man has said it was true. Do not believe in words because they are followed by tradition. Find out the truth for yourself. Reason it out, that is realization.”\textsuperscript{22a}

Bhubaneshwari also taught Vivekananda the following truths: “Remain pure all your life, guard your own honour and never transgress the honour of others. Be very tranquil, but when necessary, harden your heart.”\textsuperscript{23} What did Vivekananda think of such teachings of his mother? He remembered them all his life and loved his mother throughout his life for all that he had learnt from her. Indeed, he proudly mentioned his mother many years later to an audience in the following words: “I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge.”\textsuperscript{24} Elsewhere, he also said that he was indebted to his mother for “whatever religious culture I have”.\textsuperscript{25}
The greatest utterance of Bhubaneshwari to her son sprang from an incident in the life of the boy when he was only six years old. He took a younger lad, a relation of him, to the Charhak fair at which worship used to be offered to Lord Shiva through many acts of physical feat that involved pain and suffering on the part of the worshipper. Having purchased the doll-images of Lord Shiva at the fair, he and the younger relative of him were on their way back to home from the fair when the younger lad was about to be run over and crushed by galloping horses.\(^{26}\) In an instant, at a great risk to his own life, Vivekananda jumped before the galloping horses and rescued the younger boy almost from under the galloping horses’ hoofs. When Vivekananda’s mother heard of the dare-devil feat of her son, she wept in happiness and said to him, “Always be a man, my son!” No advice had ever become more true in the life of Swami Vivekananda. He made the mother’s advice the motto of his life, being a man himself and devoting his life towards making men of others.

The most memorable inheritance of Vivekananda from his father Viswanath was the father’s large-heartedness. Viswanath suffered so much in life. Forsaken at the age of three by a father who took to the life of a monk, he was left to the mercy of unsympathetic uncle, Kaliprasad, whom Bhupendranath, the youngest brother of Vivekananda, likened to a wolf. Kaliprasad forced Biswanath to surrender his share of the ancestral house of the Dattas and forced Bhubaneshwari into surrendering the title deed to a landed property in the Sunderbans that belonged to her. Any other man would have revolted against the injustice and persecution suffered at the hands of one’s own uncle, not Viswanath. He was anguished and yet forgiving. To quote from The Life of Swami Vivekananda, “The orphaned boy received at the hands of his uncle the kind of treatment that orphans generally receive in this world. Yet all through his life Viswanath reverenced and generally helped the uncle, though he was well aware that he had been cheated by him at every step”.\(^{28}\)

Young Vivekananda inherited this trait of his father. He must have noticed even at his young age that Kaliprasad was the persecutor of his parents and yet when the old
man, in his death bed, asked the assembled children to read from the *Mahabharata* to him, Vivekananda alone came forward to do it and he did it so earnestly that the dying man, before breathing his last, told him, “Child, you have a great future before you.”

Vivekananda was equally charitable to Kaliprasad’s daughter-in-law, an aunt to him by relation. She brought a law-suit against Vivekananda’s mother seeking to evict her and her children from the ancestral house of Simulia. The aunt in question lost the suit both on the original and appellate sides and yet towards the end of her life when she appealed to Swami Vivekananda for succour, “Vivekananda helped her with a large sum in cash.”

The boy who would give away to wandering monks whatever he could lay his hands on saw from close quarters the charitable acts of his father. Viswanath earned a lot as a successful attorney-at-law of Calcutta High Court, only to give his earnings away to the needy that included students seeking education in Calcutta as also some do-nothing members of the joint family of the Dattas who were given to drunkenness. Even young Vivekananda raised his objection against charity to this latter category to which Viswanath gave a disarming reply: “How can you understand the great misery of human life? When you realize it, you will sympathize with the poor creatures who try to forget their sorrows in the momentary oblivion obtained through intoxicants!”

‘Understand the great misery of human life’ and ‘sympathize with the poor’ is the fatherly dictum that Vivekananda mixed with his mother’s dictum: “Always be a man, my son!” He was mother’s Vireshwara and father’s Artanata rolled into the humanist Vivekananda who built up, on the foundation of the formative orientations received in his family, his approaches to the development of *man* which I have termed in this dissertation as Vedantic and Manliness approaches to human development.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. The reference is to the Brahmin boy who, by virtue of taking bhiksha or alms from Durgaprasad during his (the boy’s) sacred-thread ceremony, became the alms-giver’s – in this case, Durgaprasad’s – bhiksha-putra or son by the fact of accepting alms. This is an age-old custom followed during the sacred thread ceremony of the Brahmin boys in Bengal.


7. Nandalal belonged to the Basu family of Simulia. The Basus also lived near the Dattas in Simulia.


10. Raghumani Devi (1825-1911) belonged to the Ghose family of Beadon street, Calcutta.

11. Many of the mythological and Bhagavata stories that Vivekananda later related to his Western audiences were the ones that he had first heard during his childhood from his maternal grandmother. See *The Life*, vol.1, P.14.

13. Her house was located at 7, Ramtanu Bose Lane, Calcutta.


17. Though he transferred his worship from Rama to Shiva, the story of *Ramayana* continued to attract him. Equally attracted he was to Hanuman as Mahavira, the devoted lieutenant of Rama. To quote a biographer of Vivekananda, “Swami Vivekananda told his disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, that in his childhood, if he ever heard that there was going to be a chanting of the Ramayan by professional singers anywhere in the neighbourhood, he would attend it, leaving sport and all. He would be so engrossed in listening to it that he would stay on even if it went on far into the night. He had a great respect for Rama’s devoted servant, Hanuman. One day, learning that Hanuman, who, according to popular notions, is immortal, is to be found in banana orchards, he went into one such orchard, which was in the neighbourhood, and stayed on there till late at night, hoping that the monkey-god would give him a vision. Swami Shivananda said that Swami Vivekananda had such a respect for Hanuman that it was his heart’s wish that the worship of Hanuman (as Mahavira) should be celebrated in every Indian home. It was thus, he thought, that atmashakti (soul force) would be roused in man’s mind.” Sailendra Nath Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975), P.42. Henceforward, this title will be referred to as *A Comprehensive Biography*.


19. According to Sister Nivedita, “When he [Narendranath] was only eight years old, sitting at play, he had developed the power of entering into Samadhi”. See *The Master as I Saw Him* (Calcutta, 1918), P.165.

In 1877 on his way to Raipur in Madhya Pradesh, travelling in a bullock cart through the forest, young Narendranath fell into a trance having
sighted a big beehive in the cleft of a rock and marvelling thereupon at the marvellous handiwork of the little bees that brought to his mind the sense of infinite power of the creator. To quote Swamiji’s own reminiscence: “Filled with wonder, as I was pondering over the beginning and end of that Kindgom of bees, my mind became so much absorbed in the thought of the infinite power of God, the controller of the World, that I completely lost my consciousness of the external world for some time”. See The Life, vol.1, P.40.

During his boyhood, Vivekananda also experienced, at the end of a meditation, the vision of a sannyasin who seemed to him to be Buddha. See The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, vol.7, P.123.

It needs to be observed here that experiencing visions etc. was by no means a chance occurrence with Vivekananda during his boyhood. As a matter of fact, every night when he went to bed, he experienced a spot of light between his eyes, a light that kept expanding and finally burst bathing his whole body in a flood of light, as it were. Such occurrence signified “a great spiritual past in which the soul had learnt so well to sink itself in deep meditation that the meditative state had become spontaneous with him”. See The Life, vol.1, P.19.

20.Ibid., P.19.

21.The latter act was undoubtedly an act of dare-devilry. Referring to such acts of his childhood, Vivekananda said later to a disciple: “From my boyhood, I have been a dare-devil; otherwise, could I have attempted to make a tour round the world, almost without a penny in my pocket?” See The Life, vol.1, P.30. The immense energy that was always in evidence in the later life of Vivekananda had its beginning undoubtedly in the dare-devil acts of his childhood. As Swamiji himself related it to his English disciple E. T. Sturdy: “Well, Sturdy, in my childhood I used to observe an inexhaustible force arising in me, overflowing my body as it were. I used to become restless and could not kept quiet. This is why I used to fidget all the time. If I had nothing to read, I would turn to making mischief. If I had been made to sit quietly for
three or four days, I would have become either seriously ill or have gone mad. My insides would all the time vibrate, as it were, and make me restless to do something”. See *The Life*, P.32.

22a. *Ibid*.
23.*The Life*, vol.1, P.21.
24.*Ibid*.

Henceforward, Marie Louise Burke’s 6-volume monumental work with the same title will be referred to as New Discoveries with the volume number posted against the title.

26.*The Life*, vol. 1, P.24.
28.*The Life*, vol.1, P.4.
30.Bhupendranath, P.76.
31.*The Life*, vol.1, P.6.
32.*Ibid.*, P.7. One consequence of Vishwanath’s habit of freely giving away his earnings in charity was that he could not leave any patrimony worth its name to his children. But, then, Vishwanath believed that his sons would earn their living through their own efforts. Since the poor people did not have that strength, he thought that it was “necessary to help them”. *Ibid.*, P.6.