Chapter II

The Biosketches of Swami Vivekananda and Walt Whitman

Ideas are, in truth, forces. Infinite, too, is the power of personality. A union of the two always makes history. (qtd. in Parameswaran VII)

A detailed study of the biosketches of both Vivekananda and Whitman is immensely essential since their lives have direct impact on their philosophies. The influences they received in their lives have vital link to their vocation of bringing strong individuals, societies and nations. Mental incubation of profound philosophies happened at their earlier stages of lives. The incidents, impacts, influences, visits and every aspect of their lives shaped them to become eminent personalities in later lives. Hence this chapter gives the life history of Vivekananda and Whitman, the two historical legends, who still inspire the entire humanity. An attempt is made here to trace the development of their personalities by focusing on the birth, death, parentage, education, influences, motivations, tours, aims, experiences, achievements, ambitions, activities, trials, tribulations and fulfilment of life’s missions etc. Sailendra Nath Dhar, who has written Vivekananda’s biography, titled his first volume “The Making of Swami Vivekananda”, which serves as an example to prove that the incidents in his life have a direct bearing on his later elevation to a higher plane in life. Knowing their personality enables greater understanding of their standpoints. Both are radical thinkers
whose interest and vision went far beyond mere intellectual formulation. They were torchbearers of social, national and spiritualistic changes. During the nineteenth century, both in India and America, there was a need for a strong and inspiring voice to instill the spirit of freedom in each one’s blood stream. It was a period in which great leaders were silenced through failures; a period when revolutions were started for anti-slavery issues; a period when national feelings were getting consolidated in various parts of Europe, America, India and in other countries. Indications of future greatness were conspicuous even from childhood in Vivekananda’s life. Whitman’s life became unique because of the influences that he received in his younger days. Spirituality based man-making endeavours suffused all through their earlier stage of life and got epitomized during their mature days.

Narendra Nath Datta, which was the name of Vivekananda, was the most illustrious scion, belonged to the family of Dattas. Ram Mohan Datta was the great grandfather of Narendra whose two sons were Durga Prasad and Kaliprasad. Viswanath Datta was the son of Durga Prasad. Narendranath Datta or simply Naren, was the son of Viswanath Datta and Bhuvaneswari Devi. He was born on 12 January 1863 at 6:49 A.M in Calcutta. He was born on an auspicious festival day in a glorious brahmanuhurta hour (early morning time). As soon as the child was born, the mother called him Vireshwar after Lord Shiva since she considered the child as the incarnation of Lord Shiva. His parents belonged to the Kayastha caste. Kayasthas, though claiming to be Kshatriyas, were considered as Sudras in Bengal. His father Viswanath Datta was an attorney-at-law in the Calcutta High Court and also was proficient in English and
Persian. He took great delight in reciting to his family the poems of the Persian poet Hafiz. The Datta family of Calcutta, into which Narendra was born, was well known for its affluence, philanthropy, scholarship, and independent spirit. Narendra was true to the maxim, “Like father like son.” Narendra had a number of traits common with his father like taste for music, fondness for good meal, love for culinary art, latitudinarianism and broad mind nature. Narendra’s father was very strict and would never tolerate even the slightest deviation from good manners. Bhuvaneshwari Devi, his mother, was royal in appearance and gracious in conduct and used to tell stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which left an indelible impression on him. Narendra’s happy childhood became a strong foundation for his future great life.

As a boy he was bright, vivacious and had superabundant physical and mental power. He became the leader of his playmates. His rationalistic traits had been imbibed from his father. He was different from other fellows in his interest in meditation and he developed a wonderful capacity for concentration which resulted in the acquisition of a prodigious memory. He was a liberal in his outlook on life which was reflected in his attitude towards all religions. Traits such as courage, sympathy for the poor and attraction toward wandering monks appealed to him as a child. Parallel to his intellect and unimaginable memory power, he was also majestic in appearance with a resonant voice and a strong body build. He developed a love for the Hindu deities, particularly Rama and Sita. Later he replaced these two deities and installed the image of Shiva, the symbol of renunciation, who was the ideal of yogis. Also, he developed curiosity about the world around him. Narendra, the little boy, used to meditate with
eyes closed, one leg crossed above the other and the body erect, just as the monks sit in meditation. Sister Nivedita informs, “When he was only eight years old, sitting at play, he had developed the power of entering into Samadhi” (qtd. in Dhar 40). At this time he daily experienced a strange vision of a ball of light when he was about to fall asleep.

Years later, however, Narendra’s spiritual teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, asked him, “Naren, my boy, do you see a light when you go to sleep?” (qtd. in Nikhilananda 4). Ramakrishna knew that such a vision of light indicated a great spiritual past and an inborn habit of meditation. Here a mention must be made about one mystic appearance where during the time of meditation he witnessed a vision of “a luminous figure” which Narendra later on assumed to be Lord Buddha. On another occasion when he was travelling with his mother, brother and sister, the next trance happened which began when his eyes caught the sight of a beehive in the cleft of a rock. His mind at once engaged in contemplation of the marvellous handiwork of little insects and of the Creator. His innate tendency urged every time to see, think, grasp to understand truth from the widest and the most synthetic standpoint and to hold the real issue under discussion.

At the age of six, Narendra was sent to a primary school. A tutor was appointed by his parents who used to teach him at home. Narendra soon showed a precocious mind and developed a keen memory. Very easily he learnt the whole of Sanskrit grammar and long passages from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He was the undisputed leader among his friends and his name Narendra (lord of men) was rightly chosen by his parents, says Swami Nikhilananda in his book on the biography of
Vivekananda. In 1870, he entered the high school and his exceptional intelligence was soon recognized by his teachers and classmates. English was one of the subjects that he liked to study in the school stage. He was very bold with mental courage, straightforwardness and at the same time simple and humble. At the age of fifteen he experienced his first spiritual ecstasy and then his temperament showed a marked change. Whatever might be the issue, he used to see truth within it. He acquired an unusual method of reading a book and acquiring the knowledge of the subject-matter. Here are his statements at his own memory power:

I could understand an author without reading every line of his book. I would read the first and last lines of a paragraph and grasp its meaning. Later I found that I could understand the subject-matter by reading only the first and last lines of a page. Afterwards I could follow the whole trend of a writer’s argument .... (Nikhilananda 11)

In 1879, Narendra entered the Presidency College of Calcutta for higher studies. Unfortunately when he was in his second year, he had repeated attacks of malarial fever. Since the college authorities refused to send him up for the university examination, he was transferred to the General Assembly, founded by the Scottish General Missionary Board, later known as the Scottish Church College. He passed the first Arts examination of the university from the college, and was placed in the second division. Soon after the results were published, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. He was well versed in Indian philosophy and music and at the same time specialized in western philosophy. His natural tendency towards spirituality and his
respect for ancient religious traditions and beliefs on the one side, and his argumentative nature coupled with his sharp intellect, on the other, were at war with each other. His eastern and western knowledge and his nature for the quest for truth prompted him to make enquiries about the existence of God. He became an agnostic and doubted the existence of God too much and too long. Christopher Isherwood was of the view that Vivekananda doubted greatly because he was capable of believing greatly. This opinion of Isherwood was cited by K.R.S. Iyengar in his website article “Mystical Prose of Swami Vivekananda” to prove that Vivekananda deformulated synthesis of eastern faith and western scepticism. He tried to find comfort in the Brahma Samaj, the popular socio-religious movement of the time that believed in a formless God.

Narendra met many prominent religious leaders but could not get convincing answers from them to his questions about the existence of God. Each pursuit only accentuated his spiritual tendency. He had a strong hatred for superstition and spiritual blindness and for him truth was the only realization. He often said, “I shall certainly become a sannyasin” (qtd. in Dhar 9). He studied classics in Sanskrit, Bengali and English. He inherited the spirit of tolerance and treated all religions equal. At this juncture, he remembered the words of William Haste, the principal and professor of English of his college, who mentioned the name of a saint Sri Ramakrishna. The professor while explaining the poem “The Excursion” of Wordsworth told that the ecstasy described by Wordsworth was experienced by Sri Ramakrishna who resided at Dakshineswar. His cousin Ramachandra Datta also induced him to visit the saint. Thus came about, in 1881, the historic meeting of these two great souls, the prophet of modern India and his Guru took place. Narendra confronted him with the usual question, “Sir, have you seen
God?” Sri Ramakrishna answered his question in the affirmative, “Yes, I have seen Him just as I see you here, only more intensely” (qtd. in Jayaraman 5). Sri Ramakrishna took him to a room wherein they were alone. Sri Ramakrishna never spoke to anybody about this part of the “meeting” which later on was disclosed by Vivekananda himself during several discourses. Ramakrishna shed profuse tears of joy, fed some sweets to Narendra and described him as the incarnation of God, born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind. Sri Ramakrishna embraced him and enquired why such a long delay had been taken before meeting him. Sri Ramakrishna’s authentic speech that he had seen God intensely impressed Narendra and later in one of his speeches entitled “My master”, he said, “For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he saw God, that religion was a reality, to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world” (qtd. in Dhar 90).

Since Narendra harboured doubts about the existence of God, there was nothing new about him asking Sri Ramakrishna whether he believed in God or had seen Him anytime in his life. There was no clear evidence either to say that Narendra was totally convinced by the reply given by Sri Ramakrishna but he was certainly sure about the master’s sincerity. He visited Sri Ramakrishna again on 5 February 1882. A strange experience befell Vivekananda at the second meeting. When Vivekananda went inside, Sri Ramakrishna came near him and affectionately made him sit on his bed. In the twinkling of an eye the master placed his right foot on Narendra’s body. The touch gave him a novel experience. Here is the experience as narrated by Vivekananda:
With my eyes open I saw that the walls of the room along with everything within it was whirling away till they vanished into naught, and the whole universe with my individuality was rushing out as it were to merge itself in some all-encompassing void. Unable to stand it I cried out, ‘Oh, sir, what is it that you have done me? I have my parents at home’. The strange queer man laughed aloud, and stroking my chest said, “All right, let it rest now. Everything will come in time. The wonder of it was that no sooner had he said this than that strange experience of mine vanished. I saw myself again and found everything within and without the room as it had been before. (qtd. in Dhar 93-94)

Sri Ramakrishna, as Vivekananda used to say in later days, could change a man’s entire course of life by a mere touch, or even a look. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to make Narendra ascend to brahma padavi (the highest spiritual status) through samadhi. Only a teacher like Sri Ramakrishna could give such a diksha (initiation) and a pupil like Narendra would be able to receive it. One day Sri Ramakrishna fell into samadhi and touched Narendra, who, in spite of all his precautions, lost all outward consciousness and this intoxicating effect lasted for a month. Narendra used to meet his teacher on Sundays and other holidays at Dakshineswar and sometimes Sri Ramakrishna who could not bear separation from him for long would come down to Calcutta to meet him. The master highly praised Narendra before his other disciples and called him a nityasiddha, that is “an ever-liberated one”. A principal point at issue between Narendra and Sri Ramakrishna during the early days of their contact with each
other was whether God was with or without form and attributes and the validity of image-worship. Sri Ramakrishna who knew that Narendra was in the path of jnana, tried constantly to instil into his mind the truth of Advaita Vedanta, the synthesis and background of Hinduism. Sri Ramakrishna told Narendra a lot on the unity of jiva and Brahma as taught in Advaita philosophy. Narendra too understood the Advaitic philosophy and believed that there was the existence of an unseen cosmic force everywhere. He felt that it was the beginning of his understanding of the Advaitic state and he never denied the existence of the all-permeating force. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to transmit all his powers to Narendra who wanted to fulfil his goal of “God realization”. Narendra was more talented than other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna because he was the one who could understand the clear hints on what his mission in life, was from the lectures given by Sri Ramakrishna. One day when the Master was in an unconscious Samadhi he said, “it is not compassion for others, but it must be service to all creatures, recognizing that all creatures are God (jiva Siva)” (Dhar 48). The implications of the ideal Bhakti (devotion) hidden in the speech was immediately grasped by Narendra. Such realization of Divinity in all the created beings and the world, leaves no room for egotism. The words of the master made him understand Advaita Vedanta. Narendra says:

I have understood from these words of wisdom that the ideal of the Vedanta, lived by recluses in the forests, can be practised at home and applied to all our daily concerns (baner Vedanta ghare ana jay). It is He who has become all the different creatures – objects of our love; and
yet He is beyond all these. Such realization of Divinity in all the created beings and the world leaves no room for egotism. Service of man, knowing him to be the manifestation of God, purifies the heart, and in no time such an aspirant realizes himself as part and parcel of God – Existence – Knowledge – Bliss. Well, if God wills, the day will come when I shall proclaim this great truth before the world at large, I shall make it the common property of all – the wise and ignorant, the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the Chandala (untouchable). (qtd. in Dhar 148-149)

These aspirations were fulfilled by him and he carried his messages from one end of the world to the other. That was his mission. Three or four days before his mahasamadhi, Sri Ramakrishna transmitted to Narendranath his own power and told him, “By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you; only after that will you go to whence you came” (Jayaraman 5). Narendra performed the austerities which were ordained by Sankaracharya in his Vivekachudamani and then began to sense the spiritual powers within him and on one occasion he transmitted a certain high consciousness of the Advaita Vedanta and his whole body got electrified with power. He learnt nirvikalpa samadhi from his master and practised it. In nirvikalpa samadhi the human personality is drowned in the ocean of an unseen cosmic powerful Force. It is the transfixing of human personality into Divinity and this is the highest spiritual realization. On Sunday, 16 August 1886, Sri Ramakrishna entered mahasamadhi, from which he never returned to the mortal plane of consciousness.
After the passing away of his master the disciples accepted *sannyasa* and decided to carry on the mission entrusted to them by their master. Many of the young disciples gathered together in an old dilapidated house at Baranagore under the leadership of Narendra. Here in the midst of a life of intense austerity and spiritual practices, the foundation of the Ramakrishna brotherhood was laid. It was during these days that Narendra along with many of his brother disciples went to Antpur, and there on Christmas Eve during 1886, sitting round a huge fire in the open took the vow of *sannyasa*. Towards the close of 1888, Narendra took temporary excursions away from the math. Narendra started his pilgrimage to see the people whom he had to serve. Thus it is observed that his parents, his English professor, Bramo-Samaj Movement, some of his associates, his master Sri Ramakrishna and his own intuitive power jointly influenced him in his younger days and he became a great spiritual leader in future.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble, an Irish by birth, later on initiated herself into *brahmacharya* and named as Nivedita meaning “the Dedicated”, became the disciple of Vivekananda. He felt that his was not the life of an ordinary recluse struggling for personal salvation. Under the influence of his burning desire to know India better he started his travel within India. He went first to Varanasi, the holiest city of the Hindus. After Varanasi, he visited Lucknow, Agra, Vrindaban, Hathras and Rishikesh and then returned to Baranagore. At Hathras, he met Sarat Chandra Gupta who became his first disciple. He was later known as Swami Sadananda. Vivekananda revealed to him the mission entrusted to him by his master, namely, the spiritual regeneration of India and the world. Sarat Chandra Gupta, who was a staff of the railway station of Hathras,
resigned his post and followed Narendra to help him in his mission. He met Parhari-Baba of Gazipur and he too became a saint and later on Narendra got many disciples. During those travels he was torn between the absorption to immerse himself in the eternal silence of the Absolute and the desire to fulfil his master’s mission. The vision of Sri Ramakrishna always insisted him to complete his life’s mission. In July 1890, the Swami took leave of Sri Sarada Devi, who was the spiritual guide of the young monks after the master’s attainment of mahasamadhi.

Vivekananda’s wanderings took him to various places of pilgrimage and of historical interest in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Mysore, Kerala, Madras and Hyderabad. Everywhere he understood the glory of ancient India in terms of political, cultural or spiritual perspectives. He moved from one state to another to explore ways to mitigate the problems of the people of India. He got chances of meeting many leading personalities and rulers of the princely states. Maharaj Ajit Singh of Khetri became his close and ardent disciple. He studied the Mahabhashya, a book written by Patanjali. Bal Gangadhar Tilak became his close friend and Narendra stayed with him at Poona. Then he went to Belgaum, Bangalore and Mysore. The Maharaja of Mysore gave him the assurance of financial support to enable him to go to the west to seek help for India and also to preach the eternal Vedantic religion. Later he visited Thiruvananthapuram and Kanyakumari. Wherever he went, he was worried about the poverty and misery of the people of the whole of India. He often travelled on foot for nearly three years and came to know India at first hand. In this sequence Kanyakumari figures as the culminating and crowning centre of his pilgrimage of India.
Vivekananda reached Kanyakumari on the 24th December 1892. When he reached Kanyakumari, the southernmost extremity of India, the first thing he did was to prostrate himself before the image of the virgin Goddess Kanyakumari and pray for the welfare of his motherland and for humanity. In front of him, about two and a half furlongs across the waters of the deep, there stood the famous rock on top of which, according to the legend, the goddess Kanya had done her *tapasya* (meditative prayer) to obtain the hand of Lord Siva. The particular rock was known as *Shripada Parai*, meaning a rock, sanctified by the touch of the feet of the Goddess. Coming to the end of his travels as a wandering monk all over India right from the Himalayas and after visiting and meditating in holy shrines in numerous places, Vivekananda was determined to perform the crowning act of all his "wanderings" by doing *tapasya* on top of the rock. He asked some fishermen to ferry him across the creek in one of their *catamarans* (boats) but they demanded their usual fare. Narendra who did not have a single penny boldly plunged into the turbulent waters and reached the destination. He reached a rock off the south coast and sat there for the whole night and went into deep meditation. It is an established fact that he spent there three days and nights, that is from 24 to 26 December 1892 and returned to the shore on the fourth day. He meditated on the past, the present and the future of India, the causes of her downfall and the means of her resurrection. He visualized mother India of the past who later on sank into degeneration and bondage but Narendra wished mother India to rise again. As regards his experiences on the rock he only said that the thing for which he had wandered both physically and mentally for years he had achieved on that spot. He then journeyed to Rameswaram and Madurai. He went to the then Madras, met a group of
his young disciples. To them, he revealed his intention of visiting America to attend the Parliament of Religions that was being convened at Chicago. He got the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi through his meditation and then confirmed his desire to visit America. When the arrangements were being made for his journey to America, there came a sudden invitation from the Maharaja of Khetri to attend celebrations in connection with the birth of his son. The Maharaja received him cordially and promised to help him, in every possible way. Before the Swami left Khetri the Maharaja had persuaded him to give up his monastic name, Swami Vividishananda and take up the name Swami Vivekananda. It was here, at his suggestion, that he assumed the name “Vivekananda” (“viveka” means “wisdom” and “ananda” means “bliss”). The name means “bliss attained through wisdom”. His journey to America commenced on 31 May 1893. Swami Vivekananda travelled to America via China, Japan and Canada and reached Chicago about the middle of July. At Chicago he was surprised like a child when he witnessed the country’s wealth and the intellectual nature of the people. To his disappointment, he learnt that the Parliament of Religions would not be held until September, and that no one could be a delegate without credentials. He blamed himself for his folly in coming to America so early without enquiring about the date when the Parliament was to commence its session. He did not expect to have any difficulties, as he had with him the letter from the authorities of the Parliament admitting him to its sessions. Before the opening of the Parliament of Religions, he found to his dismay that he had lost the address of the committee which was providing hospitality for the oriental delegates. After a night’s rest in the railway freight-yard, he set out in the morning to find somebody who could
help him out of this difficulty. Exhausted by a fruitless search he sat down on the roadside resigning himself to the Divine will. At that time, a lady of regal appearance emerged from the fashionable house opposite, approached him, and offered him help. She was Mrs. George W. Hale who gave all facilities to Vivekananda while he was in America. Later she and the members of her family became his devoted followers.

The Parliament of Religions opened on 11 September 1893. The spacious hall of the Art Institute was packed with nearly seven thousand people representing the spiritually enlightened parts of the world. On the opening day, a little before the appointed hour all delegates seemed to be in tension and silence. At 10 a.m ten strokes of the New Liberty Bell, each stroke representing one of the ten chief religions represented in the Parliament – Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Catholicism and Protestantism – announced the opening of the Parliament. The first day was devoted to speeches of welcome from officials and replies by delegates. Vivekananda sat rapt in silent meditation and when his turn came, went to the alter and silently prayed to Devi Saraswati. He addressed his audience as, “Sisters and Brothers of America” (1: 3). No sooner had he uttered those words, than a wave of enthusiasm caught the Parliament. A thrill passed through the whole Assembly. Hundreds upon hundreds rose to their feet, and sent up deafening notes of applause over and over again. When silence was restored he began his address. His paper was on Hinduism in which he discussed Hindu metaphysics, psychology, and theology. The divinity of the soul, the oneness of existence, the non-duality of Brahman, and the harmony of religions were the recurring themes of his message. He
taught that the final goal of man was becoming divine through realization of the Divine. Hence he stressed that service to humanity was service to God. The Parliament of Religions offered Vivekananda, the opportunity to present before the western world, the eternal eastern philosophies. To Vivekananda, the religion of the Hindus, based upon the teachings of the Vedas, appeared adequate to create the synthesis. By the Vedas he meant, the vast accumulated treasure of spiritual laws discovered by various Indian seers in different times. When at the end of his speech he sat down with exhaustion and emotion. The audience gave him a great ovation. All the speeches of the Swamiji at the Parliament were listened to with great respect and appreciation. All his speeches have one common theme of “universality”. He offered a “religious synthesis”. He brought out truths from the hidden Vedas in his own characteristically majestic voice and inspiring unique tone. He became India’s spiritual ambassador and pleaded eloquently for better understanding between India and the other countries in order to create a healthy synthesis of East and West, of religion and science. His speeches at the Parliament of Religions raised him to an uncommon level of supreme popularity. He became famous throughout the world. His self-assuring personal appearance was parallel to his unsurpassed intelligence and deep knowledge.

By the role he played at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago and by his subsequent work in America and England, Vivekananda fulfilled the prophecy of Sri Ramakrishna that he would be a teacher to mankind. During this time Vivekananda felt that certain yogic powers had spontaneously developed in him. Vivekananda spread the
importance of “unity in diversity” to all the nations of the world. Inculcating “human excellence” through the adherence of spirituality, was his common message.

He remained unperturbed by the oppositions. His lectures, intensely religious and philosophical, were attended everywhere by eminent people. His aim was to preach the eternal truths of Religion and to help sincere people in moulding their spiritual life. Very soon his dauntless spirit, innate purity, lofty idealism, spiritual personality and pure character attracted to him a band of sincere and loyal American disciples. His tours to the other countries added more disciples and very soon he became an outstanding figure of the religious world. His language shows the native energy of his mind. He used simple, transparent and energetic style, which eschewed all oratorical flourishes and communicated with the directness of an arrow hitting its mark. He wrote with disciplined simplicity. His prose style is lucid, clear, simple and transparent. In simple language, the highly profound religious philosophy has been brought out by him. He narrated experiences in a humorous vein and he was never at a loss for a repartee. Everyone was impressed by his extraordinary “deep bell-like beauty” of his voice, says Christopher Isherwood in the website article “Mystical Prose of Swami Vivekananda” written by K.R.S. Iyengar. The vibrations in his voice created mysterious excitement among his hearers, Valentile Chirol, in the same essay, praises Vivekananda saying that he was the first Hindu whose personality won recognition abroad for India’s ancient civilization. In the same essay Nehru also praises him as a tonic to the depressed and as one who gave self-reliance and roots to the past.
In accordance with a new plan Vivekananda left Chicago on 20 November 1893 and then started his hectic lecturing in many countries. He founded a Vedanta Society in New York and trained many disciples in America. He wrote about the different “yogas” and paid successful visits to England. Among his disciples Mrs. Sevier, Sister Nivedita, E.T. Sturdy and J.J. Goodwin, were prominent. During these visits he met the great savant Max Muller and the German orientalist Mr. Paul Deussen.

According to him, Vedanta, is the universal principle of all religions. He felt the ardent call made by his motherland and in 1896, he started his journey to India. Saradananda and Abhedananda, the disciples of Vivekananda, carried on the preaching of Vivekananda in America, London and other countries. He visited Rome and other places in Italy, and then took his boat for India at Naples on 30 December and reached Colombo on 15 January 1897. The news of his return had already reached India. Vivekananda knew that his countrymen were proud that he had successfully carried out his mission in the west and that a grand reception awaited him on his return to the motherland. It has been said that he was received as a “conquering hero”, meaning that his reception was an appreciation of the fact that he had stormed the citadel of western materialism and placed on it firmly and securely the banner of Indian spiritualism. Vivekananda exposed to the world the truths contained in India’s sacred books. The prejudices regarding religions were cleansed from the minds of the westerners through the speeches delivered by Vivekananda. India’s heritage, culture and its doctrine of harmony of Religions and the ideal of a universal brotherhood had been imparted in the minds of the people of all countries. This he achieved through his wanderings and
discourses. He got success in proving the importance of a universal Religion so that the West and the East could be united and thus pave the way for human brotherhood. He advised people to rise en masse. He felt that India’s vital force was in its immortal soul. He, in India, made a clarion call to the youth to throw away weakness and superstition and rise to build a new India. He stressed that in India the keynote of the whole music of the national life was Religion which preached the spiritual oneness of the whole universe. Vivekananda advocated a practicable Universal Religion. Blind adherence to old superstitions and religious caste prejudices were deplored by Vivekananda. When Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, he remembered the words of his master that man was the greatest manifestation of God. The master advised him to seek God in man. He started the mission for one’s own liberation and for the good of the world. Service to man and seeing God in man, is Vivekananda’s greatest gift to the modern world which is full of terrorism, strife and competition. His lectures have original and special scholastic stamp.

During 1897, he once again started his “wanderings” to different parts of the country and other countries as well. His own plan was to move from Colombo to Madras. He had great works to be accomplished for India, for which his programme was ready and he had expected that he would be able to start working on it immediately on his arrival. In Colombo he got a grand reception and he stayed there for four days. He delivered his first public lecture in Colombo and the theme of which was “India, the Punyabhumi”, means “the holy land”. He delivered another speech at the Public Hall, the subject being Vedanta philosophy and the advocacy of a Universal Religion. His
next visit was to Ramnad and he reached there on 28 January 1897. He gave a speech on Vedanta at the Christian Missionary School. He then visited Paramakkudi, Manamadurai, Madurai, Kumbakonam and then Madras. In Madras he delivered the first public speech entitled “My Plan of Campaign” at the Victoria Public Hall. He emphasized the importance of spirituality, man-making Religion, man-making theories and man-making education. His second public lecture was made in the evening of 11 February 1897 at the Victoria Public Hall on “The Sages of India”. In concluding his address, the Swami gave an account of his own master, Sri Ramakrishna. Vivekananda appealed to the people to unite themselves under one Universal Religion. The third and fourth public lectures were on “The future of India”.

He stayed in Calcutta till 8 March 1897. Then for urgent reasons of health he went to Darjeeling. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission in May 1897 and its ideals were purely spiritual and humanitarian. When plague broke out in Calcutta in May 1898, he organised relief work with the help of the members of the monastery and the disciples. After the plague was under control, the Swamiji and his western disciples left for Nainital and Almora. This was a period of great preparation and training for his western disciples especially Sister Nivedita. The famous Belur Math was constructed. The Bengali monthly *Udbathan* was launched at this time. The English monthly *Prabuddha Bharata* was published from Madras first, then from Almora and then from Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati. Vivekananda advocated the values and the constant need for human excellence. Swamiji was very firm in his conviction that one’s own emancipation and the good of one’s fellowmen would lead on to the holistic uplift of
one's society and nation. Individual purity becomes the cause for societal, national and
global purity and goodness. It is the strong faith of Vivekananda. Due to long travels,
Swamiji was having intermittent health problems and his brother monks felt that his
revisit to the West might improve his health.

To fulfil his mission of inculcating spiritually oriented life, Swamiji once again
left India on 20 June 1899 to visit the western countries. The ship arrived in London on
31 July and the trip gave him physical and mental solace. After spending two weeks in
London, he sailed for New York. He visited Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco and
also made short trips to Chicago and Detroit. His conviction that the East and the West
ought to be mutually helpful and co-operate with each other grew stronger upon him.
The social and economic setbacks in India prompted him to work further positively for
the betterment of India. He earnestly proposed for a proper fusion of the ideals of the
East and the West. He visited San Francisco and then California. The main event of
this period was the starting of the Shanti Ashram in Northern California, which he
placed under the charge of Swami Turiyananda. A Vedanta centre at San Francisco was
also inaugurated. Innumerable lectures had been delivered during this period. He
understood that his end was nearing. In his letter to Miss Macleod, his disciple, he
wrote that his life boat was nearing the calm harbour where he would undergo the
spiritual bliss.

In his lecture “Is Vedanta the Future Religion?”, he dealt with the main
teachings of Vedanta. According to him, only Vedanta formulates, not only universal
brotherhood, but also universal oneness. He appealed to the people to look within,
never without. Vedanta includes no sect, no caste and no creed in. The whole of humanity should become spiritual. He went to France during 1900 and in Paris he participated in the Congress of the history of Religions. With some friends he left Paris in October and visited Hungary, Rumania, Serbia and Bulgaria. Then he went to Athens and Cairo. While in Cairo, he got a premonition of Captain Sevier’s death. He reached the Belur Math on 9 December 1900 without any previous intimation. Sevier had passed away on 28 October and he left immediately for Mayavati to console Mrs. Sevier. The Ashrama was dedicated to Advaita. His health had deteriorated and his asthma began to trouble him again. He returned to Belur, stayed there for seven weeks, and then left for East Bengal and Assam. His mother visited many holy places with him. He returned to the Math during the second week of May 1901 after delivering lectures at Dacca and Shillong.

During 1901, the Swami who stayed in the Math, seemed to be in a detached mood but indulging in constructive works. He freed himself entirely from all formal duties by executing a Deed of Trust in favour of his brother disciples, transferring to them all the properties including the Belur Math, so far held in his name. He used to instruct his disciples, supervise all types of work in the Math, engage in serious study and in all positive Math duties. Two learned Buddhists came from Japan, to invite him to attend the forthcoming Congress of Religions there. He could not accept their invitation, but went with them to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi. At Varanasi, he was delighted to see a few young men who, under the inspiration of his message, had started nursing the poor and the needy. Their work formed the nucleus of the future
Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Calcutta he wanted to meet Vivekananda. Though he could not meet him on that day, he was so influenced by Swamiji. When Vivekananda arrived at Varanasi, people received him with reverence.

The Ramakrishna Mission had fully accepted Swamiji’s sevadharma (service to humanity), and right from the beginning it has served as a great foundation, spreading higher ideals. During 1902 after his return from Varanasi, the idea that generally prevailed was that his health was slowly getting deteriorated. He gave Sr. Nivedita his blessings for all her spiritual endeavours. Next day, in the morning, Nivedita came and met Swamiji in his room at Belur. She found him immersed in his self in the turiya stage as if, he was, above the joys and sorrows of the world. On 29 June, knowing that his end was near he said to Nivedita thus, “Well, well, Margaret, perhaps you are right, only I feel I am drawing near to death, I cannot bend my mind to these worldly things now” (Dhar 1459).

About a week before his passing away, he had asked the disciple, Swami Suddhananda, to bring to him a Bengali almanac and after the latter had done so, turned over several pages of it beginning from the current day and kept the book in his room. He was seen several times studying the almanac carefully, as if he was undecided about something he wanted to know. It was not till after his mahasamadhi that it dawned upon the monks that he might have been trying to find out in the almanac, as Sri Ramakrishna, a day for it. It has been suggested that he chose 4 July for the purpose because it was the anniversary of the day of American Declaration of Independence.
On the particular day, 4 July 1902, Vivekananda, as usual, rose from bed. He expressed a desire to worship the goddess Kali on that day. At 8.30 a.m. Swamiji came to the chapel and sat down in meditation there. He went inside his personal room and sat down in meditation. He was in spiritual touch with the Master and the Divine Mother. He said to himself, “If there were another Vivekananda, he would understand what Vivekananda has done! And yet – how many Vivekanandas shall be born in time” (Dhar 1464). He taught Sanskrit grammar to his Math students. As he was walking in the garden, he talked about human civilization. He then went upstairs, asked one of his disciples to bring his rosary. He instructed the disciple to wait outside and meditate and himself sat down to meditate, his face turned towards the northwest, which was unusual. He asked his disciple to open the doors and windows of the room, saying that he was feeling hot, and laid himself down with the rosary still in his hand. He then asked Brajendra to fan his head a little and after he had done this for sometime he had fallen into a light sleep. After an hour, the Swamiji lying on his left side and then changing his sides once. Shortly after this, his hand shook a little, and then, just as babies cry out as if dreaming during their sleep, he cried out. The Brahmachari noticed shortly after this that Swamiji breathed a deep breath and his head rolled down by the pillow. Another long, deep breath like the preceding one, and then all was calm and still about him, like death.

Brajendra called the other disciples and everyone examined Swamiji’s pulse and understood that the pulse beating had stopped while the hands and feet were cold. Unable to believe the unbelievable, they thought that the Swamiji was in samadhi and
all began to call aloud the name of Sri Ramakrishna to his ears, a method which many times in the past had been used to revive him from meditation. As there was no response, they understood that it might be mahasamadhi. On the spot where Swamiji was cremated, there now stands a noble mausoleum. Only his mortal body had disappeared but his words uttered in 1896 to Mr. Eric Hammond in London remained to reassure everyone of his immortality, “It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire man everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God” (Jayaraman 12).

Vivekananda was viewed as an extraordinary personality who has got an important place in the history of modern India. Vivekananda, the patriot-saint of India, was an inspirer of universal consciousness. Each human is God and service to man is service to God, were his messages which were practised throughout his life. He was a lover of mankind, promoted peace and human brotherhood on the spiritual foundation of the Vedantic oneness of existence. He had a direct and intuitive experience of Reality and derived his ideas from that unfailing source of wisdom and presented them in the soul-stirring language of poetry.

In the course of his short life of thirty-nine years (1863-1902), he devoted ten years for public activities in the midst of turbulent social and national problems. He left for posterity his four classics: Jnana-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, and Raja-Yoga, all of which are outstanding treatises on Hindu philosophy. In addition, he delivered innumerable lectures, wrote inspiring letters in his own hand to his friends and
disciples, composed numerous poems, and acted as spiritual guide to the many seekers who came to him for instruction. The Ramakrishna order of monks is the most outstanding religious organization of modern India. It is devoted to the propagation of the Hindu spiritual culture not only in India but also in America and in other parts of the world.

Walt Whitman, the counterpart and contemporary of Vivekananda has been the representative poet of the United States of America. Whitman is known to the world as a poet, social reformer, patriot, spiritualist and representative poet of America. Michael Santine Gould in his article “Walt Whitman FAQ” looks upon Whitman as the most candid human being.

Walt Whitman was born in a farm house at West Hills of Long Island in New York on 31 May 1819. Walter Whitman, the father, was a farmer-tuned carpenter and house builder. He was forced to shift the family to Brooklyn for financial reasons. His mother, Lousia Van Velsor, was Dutch and Welsh, with the Dutch and Quaker ancestry and was the second child in his family. On his mother’s side he belonged to the Dutch Quaker sailors and on his father’s side his lineage could be traced to the colonists of English origin. His mother served throughout his life as his “emotional touchstone”, says Ed Folsom in his article on the biography of Whitman. Whitman belonged to the first generation of Americans who were born in the newly formed United States. He developed a life long love of the Long Island shore. One of his later poems “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is on one level a reminiscence of his boyhood on the Long Island shore.
His mother belonged to a Quaker family. The Quakers believed in an “inner light”, complete freedom of conscience and equality between men and women without caring for the formal ceremonies of the Church. Whitman, as a boy, was greatly influenced by the radical, democratic views of his father and the Quakerism of his mother. On May 27, 1823, when his family moved to Brooklyn from West Hills, Whitman was only four years old. Walter Whitman found employment in Brooklyn, first as a wage earner and later as a contractor or speculative builder. The family never felt any identity with the elite section, from which they were excluded both by economic and by social barrier. This shift to Brooklyn helped Whitman to enjoy the life of a large city and pleasant countryside. Jesse, Whitman, Mary, Hannah Lousia, Andrew Jackson and George Washington were the children of Walter Whitman. The father was on friendly terms with Tom Paine, an old patriot and Elias Hicks, the radical Quaker preacher. His mother was a good cook, an industrious housekeeper, and a peacemaker of the family and Whitman imbibed her pleasing loving nature. Young Whitman was a phlegmatic, even tempered, and agreeable boy who loved crowds and spectacles of all kinds. The East River became his backyard and he never was tired of watching the ships and barges on the water or the teamsters, hucksters and loafers ashore.

Two years after the Whitmans moved to Brooklyn, little Whitman had a fortunate experience of meeting General Lafayette, who had agreed to lay the cornerstone for a library cum public hall for lectures and cultural activities. Lafayette was surrounded by children and Whitman had the good luck to be picked up and carried
by Lafayette, the old companion of Washington. This experience lingered in the boy’s memory, and culminated in significant literary productions. After he became a poet he wrote three separate versions of it, in the later versions adding a kiss from the General as a prophetic blessing. Whitman later realized that this touch of the hero anointed him to become a poet of democracy in future. Whitman in his later accounts mentioned his regular and Sunday-school children. In Brooklyn people believed that there was a direct correlation between illiteracy and crime. Therefore nearly all churches in Brooklyn had Sunday schools, and at various times Whitman attended several of them, but he was deeply impressed by St. Ann’s school. St. Ann was “twined with memories” (qtd. in Allen 10). What he learned there he did not say, but his memories were evergreen regarding the grass, shady trees and kindness which were absent in some of the institutions. His remembrance of the “grass”, in the gardens of the school, later on acquired thematic importance in his *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman attended a public school for six years and probably one or two other children of the family too must have also enrolled in the similar periods. Young Whitman felt that corporal punishment was the worst crime in education. Whitman’s boyhood was filled with restlessness and unhappiness but the monitors and teachers never went out of the limit to lessen his deeper feelings, uncertainty and unhappiness. Whitman used to observe all crowds and excitements without the company of his brothers and sisters. Accompanied by his parents, he listened to Elias Hicks a Quaker preacher. This Quaker theologian, who was his life long hero might have been one of the sources for the selection of the name *Leaves of Grass* which in later life brought Whitman to the limelight. Elias preached that the fullness of Godhead dwelt in every blade of grass. Whitman’s Quaker values
also compelled him to nurse the wounded. The parents were so spiritual that they never missed any of the preachings of Elias Hicks and the well behaved boy, little Whitman, also got the chance to listen to the old preacher.

Whitman always felt an unseen strong bond of spiritual kinship with this Quaker preacher. His grandmother Amy created a strong positive impression, like his loving, mild, gentle, sweet-tempered mother. The hearty cheerful nature of Van Velsor, the grandfather, impressed him to maintain good terms with the world. Whitman was impressed by a socialist, Charles Fourier who gave the idea that a grass, an insect, the stars and such animate and inanimate beings were ruled by the law of attraction of the Universe. His father’s father Jesse Whitman, and mother, Hannah Brush Whitman, impressed him particularly with their manners, bravery and patriotism. All the Whitmans, had supported the American War of Independence, and one of his great uncles was killed in the battle at Brooklyn. His paternal great grandfather, Nehemiah Whitman, was a very rich man who owned lands and also slaves. His strong-willed wife, Sarah White, was so bold that she frequently visited the farms in the saddle, directing the labour of her slaves. Later the unconventional, unorthodox Whitmans owed something to these old couple, yet they never inherited their financial competence. When the ancestral estate reached Walter Whitman, it had been divided and subdivided so many times that Whitman’s father could not make a living on his share. The Whitmans were too uncompromising that they could not get worldly success. Whitman visited his grandparents often, at all seasons, not only for their association, but also because he loved Long Island and the vast ocean. The Whitmans
loved the ocean in their own way. The highest elevation of Long Island was at West Hills, from which the sea was visible in all directions. They could listen to the sound of the sea waves from the heights of West Hills. Later in his poems, Whitman elaborated on the ocean in all its splendour. Perhaps his observations and sea experiences helped him later. Sometimes Whitman met the unkempt, half barbarous herdsmen of the eastern end of the island. His companions were outdoor men, uneducated farmers, herdsmen, fishermen and pilots who took him around the island on sailing trips.

The influences and impacts which he imbibed from the association of these people developed his mind and character. The seeds of becoming a good poet had been sown on his mind at this stage through the people discussed so far and also by the various environments screened hitherto in this chapter. Though gregarious, he was naturally hedonistic and narcissistic.

Nature and nurture so determined his strenuous hard work that at the age of eleven he went to work as an office boy, for two prominent lawyers, James B. Clark and his son Edward, members of St.Ann’s church. He got this employment since he aroused their sympathy and interest. His education at St.Ann’s was stopped but that did not mean the end of Whitman’s education. In fact, it would continue rapidly in office, print shop, newspaper office and in places wherever he went for employment. Edward Clark, a young lawyer, was the one who helped him to improve the handwriting and composition. He gave Whitman a subscription to a circulating library which offered him the opportunity to be with books. Whitman read Scott’s novels one after another, then his poetry and cultivated a spirit for literature. Later Whitman could recall the
pleasure trips his lawyer employers provided him and his chance to take messages to Aaron-Burr, a man of kindness who also influenced him through his stateliness, grey hair, courtesy and consideration. He did not dwell on his second employment probably because it was uncongenial or of a short duration.

Whitman became an apprentice to Clements, an editor of The Patriot, a weekly published with the slogan, “the right of the people to rule in every case” (qtd. in Allen 18). Whitman contributed his views in the weekly and thus his first step in authorship began at the early age of twelve. Whitman felt happy to see his name in print. In a website article written by Education Folsom and Kenneth M. Price it was recorded that his heart “double-beat” with happiness. The printer William Hartshorne left a lasting impression on Whitman. Whitman’s own character was influenced by Hartshorne’s cheerful sagacious manners. This man gave Whitman his first instruction in typesetting. The printing office was a lively and exhilarating place for Whitman who was an apprentice. Despite his boyish capers Whitman developed some interests beyond his years. With an ardent spirit he listened to Hartshorne’s reminiscences of Washington, Jefferson and other heroes of the early years of the Republic. Whitman was impervious to any theology and later his Leaves of Grass was based on spirituality which seemed to have parallels with the Advaitic principle of “monism”.

By the summer of 1832, when Whitman had begun working for another Brooklyn printer, Erastus Worthington, his family moved back to their native country West-Hills. Whitman remained in Brooklyn and developed interest in the life of the city in all vicissitudes. He lists in Specimen Days the names of plays and actors of
operas and singers familiar to him in those formative years. Education Folsom and Kenneth in their website article “Biography” observed that it was during this period that Whitman developed the habit of close observation of the ever-shifting panorama of the city. Whitman had grown and begun to acquire some of the tastes and habits that were to influence and characterize his adult life. He began to publish in the celebrated and fashionable *Mirror* magazine. His employment in the Star printing office led him to join in the debating society in Brooklyn, a new form of education and recreation combined. Whitman’s work “The Shadow and Light of a Young Man’s Soul” was so revealing more or less like an autobiography published in 1840. At seventeen Whitman became a journeyman printer in New York city and also worked as a teacher in a district school not far from his paternal grandfather’s farm, where he had spent some of his happiest days before his grandmother’s death. His experiences in printing and newspaper offices acquainted him with the knowledge of many subjects and this helped him to become a teacher. Since the Whitmans moved from Hempstead to the vicinity of Babylon, Whitman left his teaching job and was compelled by his father to work on the farm but he rebelled. There were emotional outbursts between the father and the son due to differences of opinion.

The nation was in the grip of the worst economic depression in its history during 1837. Whitman returned to school teaching at Smith town, about ten miles east of West Hills. He joined in a debating society and matured minds appreciated his views, for the subjects discussed were serious and important. His topics were mainly on military training, liberal education, imperialism, settling national disputes without war etc. It
must be noted here that his “spiritual nationalism” might have laid its foundation at this period. A very interesting topic for him was “Has Nature more influence than education in the formation of character?” (qtd. in Allen 32). He made so good a record in the Smith town Debating Society. In the spring of 1838, when he decided to start a newspaper in Huntington, his Smith town friends offered a loan for this venture. So there was no difficulty for him to launch his weekly paper *Long Islander*. One of his students, Charles A. Roe, stated that Whitman discarded the usual methods of teaching and depended on conversation and oral instruction. Whitman gave “mental arithmetic” and participated with the students in the games, and paid special attention to younger children. He never used corporal punishment. If he detected a student in a falsehood, he exposed him in a story told in such a way “that the guilty fellow knew who was meant” without having his name mentioned. It is not surprising that his students were attached to him. In total, at this juncture, the personality of Whitman, was very modest, neat, understandable and healthy. Whitman wrote a series of essays called “Sun-Down Papers from the Desk of a School-Master” that was published in the *Long Island Democrat*. Already he felt a premonition of his destiny to be the “solitary singer” though he was surrounded by friendly faces. Whitman was characterized as a “Champion of Democracy” in the *Long Island Farmer* (qtd. in Allen 39).

When he was nearing the age of twenty two he moved from Brooklyn to the bustling New York City. By this time, he had evolved as a best school teacher, country journalist, and political campaigner with the basic foundation of spirituality. Emerson was the spiritual guru for him during his formative years. Unlike Vivekananda,
Whitman was no spellbinder but he was a person of high integrity with a spiritual prophecy and nationalistic feelings. He appealed to his countrymen to select people with “great principles” as politicians. Later in his Democratic Vistas and “Song of Myself” he laid stress on individual perfection which jointly paved the way for a nation’s progress. Whitman’s essays, at this stage, were published in the Democratic Review edited by O’Sullivan. Two novels by Georges Sand helped to fix the direction of Whitman’s thinking. One was The Countess of Rudolstadt which featured a wandering bard and prophet who expounded a new religion of humanity. The other was The Journeyman Joiner, the story of a proletarian philosopher who worked as a carpenter but devoted time in reading. Whitman began writing for a daily paper, the Aurora. This journal was a democratic one, where Whitman also published essays dealing with democracy. The future, he believed, held unlimited opportunities for him. This buoyant mood made him re-assert “Americanism”, a policy of Aurora (Dhar 49). He planned to start a department of weekly literary criticism in the Aurora, but he left the paper before he could carry out the plan. He called Long Fellow “one of the best of American bards” and Bryant, “the greatest” (Dhar 50). He was very sensitive at the narrow-minded political disputes and very firm in his democratic principle based on pure humanism. His “humanism” was so extensive that he even sympathised with the prostitutes. Such compassion and sympathy he expressed in his “Song of Myself”. He was a man of extreme individualism, which resembled the doctrines of New English Transcendentalists, it was more likely derived from the Jeffersonian tradition. Whitman was very straight forward in exposing the wicked nature of people, whoever they were,
in *Aurora*. Whitman’s indifferent manners and habits irritated his employers and they got rid of him from *Aurora*.

Whitman did not remain out for long. He started editing another paper, *Evening Tattler*, a daily. He hated the flimsiness of American aristocracy and wrote his views in the same daily. He also continued to publish in the *Democratic Review* his experiences and views in the form of stories. In his poem “The Angel of Tears” one can see Poe’s influence. He had decided to write *Leaves of Grass* for his “divine-average”, as he would consider his audience. He was very ambitious to become a fiction writer. He moved toward experimental verse, and some of his themes selected for fiction later on flourished in *Leaves of Grass*.

He met Colonel Fellows, who had known Tom Paine which led him to meet many democratic editors. For two or three months he was in charge of the *Statesmen*. In 1844, Whitman wrote for the *New Mirror* but only for two or three weeks. He was capable of sharing the emotions of mothers and older women. In 1845, his four-year apprenticeship as a journalist in New York had come to an end. His style and opinions so far were forerunners of his mature literary theory. He always stressed moral values. According to him every human “soul” was a hidden sea. He always had interest in national affairs. He became the editor of *Brooklyn Eagle*. By this time he developed a wide contact with people through the medium of ink and paper. He wanted to lose himself in the ceaseless flux of the wondrous race. Whitman understood the principle of life in all things, even in animals. He had no doubt about the existence of God or a
Supreme Power of some kind. Regarding the innate divinity of man, Whitman had no second thoughts. His ideologies on spirituality echo, the Indian philosophies.

Whitman read O.M. Mitchel’s book, *The Course of Six Lectures on Astronomy*, to get the facts, ideas and figures of speech in many passages of “Song of Myself” and later poems. He might have read C.S. Rafinesque’s *Celestial Wonders of Philosophy*, for in several passages he used some of the figurative language of this book. While the modern researchers find the similarities of science and transcendentalism, physics and metaphysics, quantum theory and *Advaita*, Whitman had already recorded these observations in his “Song of Myself”. O.M. Mitchel, as quoted in Dhar, once stated that Whitman, in his imagination travelled past the sun, the stars and the entire circuit, filled with suns and systems that burn, roll and shine of people going and coming. One of the most important reforms beginning to take shape in his mind was religious. He asserted that religion should liberate one rather than restrain.

Whitman was inherently a spirituality based patriot. He observed and understood that slavery was a threat to free labour. He urged people to maintain “free soil” and “free labour” and a “boundless democratic free West” (Dhar 89). Whitman edited *Barnburner* in Brooklyn and communicated his views to the people through the medium of writing. He spent his time in his office and wrote actually “feature stories” for the *Crescent*, depicting the politics of the period. Whitman visited the whole of America and imbibed a sense of space, natural resources and potential strength of the nation. In his moral principle, he was very adamant like a puritan. He was supporting the cause of freedom and instilled the spirit of independence in the blood of the people
through his forcible directions. The cause of freedom was holy and that its defenders were dedicated souls.

The period between 1850 and 1855 was the most important period in the life of Whitman. Though it was outwardly an undramatic period, intellectually and spiritually these were the most successful and fruitful years that Whitman had experienced. During these five years he wrote and printed his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and created a new epoch not only in American but even in the world literature. He had an amazing knack for purifying and ennobling the crazy visions of the movements of his time and transmuting them into immortal poetry. Mitchell Santine Gould in his website article “Walt Whitman FAQ” points out that “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass* brims with fantastic imagery borrowed from those cultures that worked well during his life time. Gould in the same article further says that Whitman had the “hide of rhinoceros” for abuse and at the same time had an icy way of clamming up when assaulted by bigotry, impertinence or prying. His poetry is powerful because each part is enriched with intensity, leading onto his main purpose. Whitman strongly believed that his book would change the American society politically, socially and spiritually. His empathy for the society, patriotism for the nation, which are imbued with spiritualism find a place in his poems and essays. His enjoyment for music is accompanied with emotion. After his role as a poet had become clear to him, he gave up his work as a carpenter. He loved the noise, the movement, the multitude of people especially the bus drivers, whom he later characterized as natural wondrous race.
Whitman was interested in Geology. His pre-Darwinian concepts of biological evolution meant for him “cosmic evolution” (qtd. in Allen 125). Laplace’s “nebular hypothesis” appealed to him. He believed in the cyclic processes of creation, disintegration and recreation. Whitman usually gathered information from people who had received unusual knowledge. His library readings helped him a lot in future. Though very modest and calm, Whitman was very active inwardly that he studied everything which went around him.

Whitman regarded reading as a creative activity and in this respect he resembled Emerson. In an article entitled “Thoughts on Reading” he underscored, “An author enriches us, not so much by giving us his ideas, as by unfolding in us the same powers that originated them” (Dhar 126). Though *Leaves of Grass* had faced opposition from a section of the public, many people became the admirers of its writers. They felt that Whitman appeared as a prophet of imaginative feeling for the antiquity of the human race, its continuity of life and culture. Whitman was a good observer of the people and the environment. His disposition was such that he did not give much importance to economic success. He considered truth and justice as immortal principles of the world. His religious sense was universal that he could grasp something good in every religion.

Whitman regarded reading as a creative activity and in this respect he resembled Emerson. In an article entitled “Thoughts on Reading” he underscored, “An author enriches us, not so much by giving us his ideas, as by unfolding in us the same powers that originated them” (qtd. in Allen 126). Even before 1850 Whitman had read a number of Greek and Roman classics in translation. He read many of the British and
American authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Cooper, Irving, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Bryant, Emerson and Carlyle. Around 1850, Whitman’s reading became more systematic. These readings gave Whitman a general knowledge of history, science, ethnology and literary history. Whitman was constantly influenced by a literary group named “Young America” whose influence extended over many years. The critics belonged to the “Young America” shifted their literary approach from “the text” to the “maker” or “creator” of the poem. They also imparted social reform and idealism on Whitman. During this period people recognized Whitman as a real poet of the time. People addressed him as a great poet and as they wished he later on became a world-renowned bard.

According to Whitman a great poet absorbs the identity of others, their experiences and perceives all of them. Regarding “genius” he says, “true genius will soon cast aside whatever is alien to its individual nature” (qtd. in Allen 132). In the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and in the early notebooks Whitman mentioned the indescribable ecstasy of pure sensation. Being alive made Whitman feel immortal. Part of his life-purpose was to keep both his body and soul free and healthy. He always regarded sickness as evil. Emerson’s “Spiritual Laws” or “The Over Soul” influenced him. Whitman’s soul becomes simply “I” and he says, “I shall want to go further still” (qtd. in Allen 138). He believed that Nature spoke with him. Nature provided answers to him, and such experiences provided matter for his future poems. As a result the *Leaves of Grass* had to be revised and re-published in 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, 1876, 1881 and 1882. The secret emotional volcano within Whitman got expression in “Song
of Myself” a prominent poem in *Leaves of Grass*. The “I” in the poem is a personification of an animistic life-force.

Whitman served as an editor during 1857-1859 for the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. In 1861, the Civil War broke out in America. Though Whitman was not a soldier in the Civil War, he was treated by others as the real hero for his selfless service to the wounded soldiers and his efforts to instigate the feeling of nationalism in the blood veins of the people of America. His Quaker values compelled him to nurse the wounded. Mitchell Santine Gould in his website article “Walt Whitman FAQ” observed that either the magnetic energy literally emanated from Whitman’s body or the attractive magnetism of his appearance and cheerfulness could cure the sick. In 1862 his brother George was wounded in the war along with other soldiers. Restlessness and confusion prevailed in the country. Lincoln attained the Presidency of the precariously united nation. Whitman was a true patriot and so, he got dissatisfaction at the political efforts taken by the country. Falcon and Kenneth M. Price in their website article entitled “Biography” pointed out that Whitman was rather frustrated with the Democratic party’s compromising approaches to the slavery crisis. According to Falcon and Keneth M. Price Whitman’s writings were so powerful that they could transform “the way of thinking” of the people. Whitman visited camp hospitals of the Army of the Potomac in Virginia. His “*Drum Taps*” published in 1865 recorded the war experiences. Ed Falcon and Kenneth M. Price in their website article “Biography” pointed out that democracy was “central” in Whitman’s vision. He
considered the poorest and the most despised as important as the rich and famous. This was the theory of radical union and equality that generated Whitman’s work.

Whitman continued to work as a correspondent for the *New York Times* and other papers. He had created a very good circle of friends, including John Burroughs, Trowbridge, Peter Doyle, E.C. Stedman and Henry Clapp. Among them Henry Clapp became his best friend and Whitman felt that all books on his biography should include the name of Henry Clapp.

The reading public gradually understood the significance of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* for its themes of democracy and spirituality. Whitman received amazing success and popularity through *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman did not achieve the sweeping glory all on a sudden but he faced many ups and downs before his supreme victory. He always retained his self-knowledge, goodness and simplicity. Through his poems he built a spiritual rapport with his readers and he believed that it would continue even after his death.

A review of the several editions of *Leaves of Grass* reveals the “mystic evolution” of Whitman. The three biographical segments of Whitman’s life have correspondence with the three periods of heightened creative activity of Whitman. In the first segment of his life, he prepared himself as a modern man suitable to the new world. Poems written during this period like “One’s Self I Sing”, “Calamus”, “Song of Myself”, “Sea-Drift” were mostly involved with the identity of the self in life. The second phase of his life included the trauma of the poet during the Civil War period. Poems written during this period “Drum-Taps”, “Autumn Rivulets” and other poems
revealed the “throes of democracy”. In the third or last phase of life the poet immersed himself in spirituality. Poems written during this period like “Passage to India”, “Prayer of Columbus”, “The Sleepers” and other poems revealed his meditation. Many of his poems concentrated more on freedom democracy, equality and spirituality. His poems displayed his cosmic feeling for time, space and eternity. His leading characteristic was his religious sentiment. Even uneducated people understood the poems of Whitman and read his poems out of interest. Many people loved him for his personal characteristics. He was considered to be wise, good, adjustable man who loved his country people. He was a patriot and a “democrat” if referred the term given by Thoreau.

Civil War came to an end and his brother George returned safely home. On 15 April 1865, he read the unhappy news that President Lincoln was assassinated the night before. Whitman felt the loss of the leader deeply and wrote “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, “O Captain, My Captain”, “Hush’d be the Camps To-day”, and “This Dust was Once the Man”. His loneliness expressed in these poems was ‘cosmic’ in scale. His soul, like a spider throwing out filaments, is trying to form a bridge through empty space to another soul or some spiritual anchor.

Whitman remained a bachelor throughout his life. For the proposal of marriage, repeatedly sent to him through letters, by Anne Gilchrist, the answer given by Whitman was that he considered her as a “best friend”. Two quarrels, one personal, the other literary, increased Whitman’s nervous tension and his health worsened. It was on the night of 23 January 1873, that Whitman suffered his first paralytic stroke. He moved
from Washington to Camden, New Jersey. In 1876, he recovered, at least partially, from paralysis. In 1882 he prepared his *Specimen Days*. In 1884 Whitman bought a house in Mickle Street, Camden, where Mrs. Davis was his housekeeper. Another paralytic stroke confined him to a wheeled-chair. In 1889 he added "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" to *Leaves of Grass*. During the last years Whitman welcomed scores of visitors to his Mickle Street home and people considered their visit as a holy pilgrimage. He hoped that his tomb would become a shrine in future. On the evening of 26 March 1892, his end came peacefully. The funeral was held on March 30 and several people thronged his house to pay their tributes.

He heralded the dawn of a new era by giving a new dimension and subject-matter. He was the poet of America and American democracy from the core of his heart. He was a “modern” poet who broke away with the conventions and hackneyed terminology of English verse. The words of Ingersoll are apt to quote here:

> He has lived, he has died, and death is less terrible than it was before. Thousands and millions will walk down into the “dark valley of the shadow” holding Walt Whitman by the hand. Long after we are dead the brave words he has spoken will sound like trumpets to the dying. (qtd. in Allen 544)

This chapter throws light on the effect of nature and nurture in the formulation of the character of Vivekananda and Whitman. This chapter exposes their striking similarities and dissimilarities. They both remained celibate. The majestic and leonine appearance of Vivekananda was absent in Whitman but Whitman had his own serene
look. If Ramakrishna brought a turning point in the life of Vivekananda, it was Emerson who brought about the same change in the life of Whitman. Both received impacts from persons, events and environments which collectively transformed them popular as philosophers with pragmatic approaches. Whatever may be the problem – social or national or spiritual, both resolved them with optimistic approach. The dissimilarities are fewer but discernible. Though Whitman was a powerful writer, he was not a skillful orator like Vivekananda. The voice of Vivekananda was majestic with thunderous effect but Whitman was quite slow in speech but the words are often selective and suitable. The unauthentic charges of homosexuality against Whitman were completely absent in any account of the life history of Vivekananda. While wilful understanding of Advaita was made by Vivekananda, unconscious thoroughness of Advaita was imbibed by Whitman, either through his casual reading of Indian philosophy or through his meditation. In short, this chapter which provides a study on their personality unfolds their standpoints.
Works Cited

Secondary Sources


