CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS VERSE IN INDIA AND THE ADVENT OF

VIVEKANANDA, THE POET

"The ladder must be as tall as the height to which you
want to climb, is it not?"

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Religious verse in India dates back to The Vedas and The Vedic Literature, which is the most ancient in the world, belonging to a period of time when knowledge had to be handed down by word of mouth for centuries. What strikes us first is the marvellous feat of memory by which this vast and varied vedic literature should have been preserved in essence and transmitted by oral tradition for over 'fifteen centuries'. It is looked upon as the Truth revealed to the divinely inspired. In matters of religion and spirituality, the Vedas are accepted as infallible guide and of unquestionable authority. The greatest exponent of Vedic knowledge in recent decades, Swami Vivekananda, describes them as the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons at different times (Vivekananda l 1946 : 4-5).

The Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas described as 'Vedanta'. The sanskrit word 'Vedanta' is 'anta' or 'end' of 'Veda' or 'Wisdom', thus meaning 'the Ultimate Wisdom'. The knowledge
that The Upanishads speak of is far different from the knowledge of the scriptures, sciences and arts. It cannot be acquired by scholars, for it is not intellectual. It is understood as self-unfoldment which is the reward of an endeavour long and steady in terms of spiritual discipline. Its nucleus is nothing but the true spirit of religion or Religion with the help of which one can cross the ocean of "samsara" or be freed from 'the cycle of birth and death'. But properly adopted, they serve in day-to-day life to establish social harmony.

Next we find the two great epics of India, 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharatha'. They are the stories of how Sri Rama - God Incarnate - in the former and the Pandava brothers - dear to God as epitomes of virtues - in the latter, overcome the 'problems' of life by facing up to them boldly and adhering to the path of Dharma or virtue. They are more than mere epics or Romances. They are whole literature in themselves, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations and speculative thought on human problems. They teach us to really live life - and not merely exist as another animal on the planet. The episodes and incidents in these epics entertain children and men of lower calibre of mind but mean much more to men of intellect and Religion. Higher still, they are symbolic of that path, talking which we can not only make our lives sublime but also help others do the same. Thus they are for all time. C.Rajagopalachari, well known as Rajaji says:

"They are records of the mind and spirit of our forefathers who cared for the good, ever so much more than for the pleasant and who saw more of the mystery of life than we
can do in our interminable pursuit for petty and illusory achievements in the moral plane" (Rajagopalachari 1958: 6).

Thus all ancient writings of India are saturated with Religion. The religious poetry of later ages, is only this old wine in newer bottles of different shapes and sizes to suit the newer generations of men. In various tongues popular in different pockets of the land of The Vedas, these ancient works reappeared without losing out on charm, fervour and the original tone of Religion. Close on the heels of these came a mushrooming of tales and parables told on Gods and Goddesses in known, unknown and imaginary lands. They endeavoured to keep alive the moral and ethical values cherished in the earlier works. The moral values and Religion contained in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the two Epics were retold in every leading language of India at regular intervals of time to make a mass of religious verse typically Indian.

The appearance of Buddhism and Jainism brought in more of religious literature. And later, enlightened souls like Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa sent the roots of devotion and religious fervour deeper into the literary outputs of their respective times. Thus we discover ancient religious verse in India as generally lyrical, philosophical, didactic, argumentative or philosophical, laying great stress on personal and social virtues respecting and recommending asceticism, renunciation, sacrifice, suffering and Religion. Wherever the tone was different, the literature turns out to be mainly manuals of ritual useful for either the day-to-day life of a devout seeker after truth or for particular occasions like
marriages, births, deaths, vows or pilgrimages. India's literature was subservient to religious fervour for at least three thousand years as seen above. The devotional aspect in these is seen to have influenced even the Muslim writers writing in Persian or Urdu when they settled in India in later centuries.

The arrival of Islam to India in the eighth century A.D. affected the Indian literary scene considerably. The Muslim writers in Persian and Urdu themselves enriched modern Indian languages. Arabic and Iranian tradition infiltrated into Indian Literature. It was clearly a case of mutually beneficial transmission of exchanges. For example, the non-conformist Sufi tradition is seen to have particularly influenced the Kashmiri and Punjabi languages (Natwar-Singh 1973: 6-9). The Indian devotional aspect had evidently influenced the works of the poet Kabir. He used Persian - Arabic words which greatly influenced and vitalised the local Hindi language. India witnessed a spurt of interest in its Sanskrit heritage and the moral message contained in the Epics and the 'Thirukkural' of the great Tamil Saint Thiruvalluvar in the second millennium A.D. The result was an explosive outpour of devotional and didactic songs and verse saturated with Religion from poet-saints from almost all centres of religious importance in this vast continent in their own local or regional languages. Sankaradev in Assamese, Chandidas in Bengali, Surdas in Braj Bhasha, Kabir Das in a mixed form of Bhojpuri and Hindi, Narasimha Mehta in Gujarathi, Purandharadasa in Kannada, Vidhyapati in Maithili, Tunjathu Ezhuththachchan in Malayalam, Eknath in Marathi, Guru Nanak in Punjabi, Meera Bai in Rajasthani,
Kambar and Arungirinathar in Tamil, Thyagaraja and Annamacharya in Telugu... are names very familiar to most devout Indians wherever they are.

Like the civilization of India itself, Indian literature which is multi-lingual in character, reflects a diversity of races, cultures and religions. But taken as a whole, these verses constitute a formidable example of Indian tradition. Irrespective of the language they wrote in, these great writers have worked within that tradition almost unconsciously, establishing a unity in diversity which drew its strength from the concept of India as a nation. It is important to see that these varied efforts in different tongues in different centres of a vast land all lie above the divisions of caste, creed, doctrine and community. Nor do they recognize any regionalism or any other force which divides man from man. They are all mere statements loud and clear of the true spirit of religion and hence carry an imprint of unified harmony.

History tells us that the death of the Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707 brought in great political uncertainty - resulting in intellectual apathy and general cultural decay to give Indian literature one of the several 'lows' it experienced. It was the most opportune moment for the English language to enter the Indian scene now and to alter the pattern of literary mores for mutual benefit and enrichment.

Laying the foundations of a new system of education Lord Macaulay set out to promote nothing but European Literature and
Science among the natives. But several enlightened youth of India like Raja Ram Mohan Roy sought the Western Education of a liberal kind. They learnt the English language voluntarily and enthusiastically. While they denounced the English in almost every field of life and thought, they were quick to realise the new dimension the language of the Englishmen would extend to their intellectual equipment and were quick to master it. The English language thus gained inroads into Indian life and literature through the educated natives. This language when established in this land shook the Indian intelligentsia out of their mental stupor and chronic pre-occupation with the past. Its service to the nation in the field of science, engineering, medicine and political science can never be overlooked or exaggerated. Nor can the debt that modern Indian literature owes to English be underestimated.

Indian literature in English was the inevitable consequence of the situation described above. This 'new' literature carries characteristics which are common to literatures of other parts of the world along with those clearly related to the special circumstances of India. What one cannot but admire is the natural nativization of the English language in India to express the Indian sensibility in this literature. Naik finds this "[.....] the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding" (Naik 1982 : 143). But Sri Aurobindo points out that the Indian Renaissance in the later half of the eighteenth century was less like the European one and more like the Celtic movement in Ireland.
"Writers of verse may conveniently be considered in the groups - practitioners of religious, mystical, philosophical, reflective verse [........] and poets mainly in the Romantic-Victorian tradition, who have a wider range of themes and who occasionally also try rather half-heartedly to experiment with modernism" (Aurobindo Vol. xiv 1972 : 397).

Any ardent student of literature is little likely to mistake these two 'groups' as mutually exclusive.

Religious verse, as usual took the lead in this 'new' literature also. The poetry produced in English by Indian writers in the nineteenth century is essentially religious and is full of vitality and promise. Understandably its strength and sustenance are drawn from the great literary past of the country - the Vedas, the Puranas, the Epics etc - which are the most ancient in the world, and also from the 'more recent' works like those of Thiruvalluvar and Tukaram, Sankaracharya and Sankaradev, Kambar and Kabir.

The earliest sample of religious verse in Indian English writings could be noticed in Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73). His "Visions Of The Past" (1849) is a poem of Miltonic blank verse handling the same Christian theme Milton did. A new generation of writers appeared very soon with a stunning sense of unity of purpose and of hope who thirsted for religious, political and social changes in the Indian scene. The good work done by the Brahmo Samaj (1828), Arya Samaj (1875) and the Theosophical society - shifted from New York to Madras in India - (1878) in making the new winds of change blow can never be overestimated.
Bengal undoubtedly was the epicentre of all such activity. The keening incident of the time was the appearance of a genuine Hindu mystic and saint, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886), whose very life cast a spell on the youth of Bengal generally.

Our interest here is that this saint effected a grand transformation in young Narendranath to make him the Swami Vivekananda the world knows him as today. The history the Swami made by his appearance in 1893 at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and by his whirlpool tours in the West and in India lie well beyond the scope of this dissertation. In a public life of just nine years, Vivekananda is known to have given lectures by the hundred, written various articles and a lot of correspondence with people all over the world, which are all, without exception, considered extremely valuable today for throwing more and more light on the personality and mission of their author. But not many outside the circle of his friends and admirers in India or abroad have had the opportunity to know of him as a writer of poems.

The earliest poetical work of Indian spirituality to take the West by storm has undoubtedly been Rabindranath Tagore's great work, "Gitanjali", translated into English by the author himself. It also won him the Nobel Prize for literature. But the fact is that -

"[.........] long before the "Gitanjali" of Rabindranath Tagore, he (Swami Vivekananda) delivered to the West the message of our spiritual bards of the bygone ages festooned with fine flowers of poetry. His message is a bridge of goodwill between the Orient and the Occident" (Rao 1964: 76).
The truth is that Swami Vivekananda was a poet comparable with any great and accepted poet for his output of religious verse. His poetry includes several poems in Bengali, a volume of translation into English, and twenty-two poems, his original in English, in addition to verses in Sanskrit and Hindi. He had great command of all these languages. Our interest here, his exquisite poems in English, combine in them a high order of poetic appeal and spiritual urge in equal measure and are true reflectors of Religion that is part and parcel of India's tradition. The poetic gift of this writer synthesises admirably the volumes of poetic thought of the saintly visions of the entire past of India.

Rome was not built in a day. Nor was it built by a single pair of hands. So would be the case with any literature that is great and established. So was it with the re-creation of India's religious glory in English by many a singing bird in enchanting poems, their themes varying from love and beauty to Universal Truth. Swami Vivekananda was one such singing bird. As a true and typical son of the great Indian philosophical and philanthropic tradition, "he derived his ideas from the unfailing source of wisdom and often presented them in the soul-stirring language of poetry" (Nikhilananda 1982: vi). Swami Vivekananda felt for certain that an integral philosophy based upon the best and finest perception of what was Indian and what belonged to the West, would be the most suited philosophy for the future world as a whole, particularly when on the threshold of a science era. When he read Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass', Vivekananda called him 'The Sannyasin of America' (Rolland 1984: 66). No wonder that 'sainthood' was reconstituted in his
counterpart by a poet who made sainthood breathe though his own verse.

In the original English poems of Swami Vivekananda one cannot miss the poet's legitimate pride as an Indian and in India's rich tradition and glorious spiritual heritage. What is far more prominent is the Religion, typically Indian from the days of the Vedas, standing out in each of these poems. Most of his poems were written by Swami Vivekananda in moments of great ecstasy. The poetic appeal here is enhanced by his spiritual joy. Any earnest reader is bound to wonder how these two aspects of his poetry are so magnificently and inseparably intertwined. The poems were all spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings and the writer would hardly have found time to retouch them in his short life of such busy travel and lectures and missionary work.

One important question that is likely to obsess an admirer of the poet is his limited output of poetry. An answer is provided by Prof B.S. Mathur to this doubt thus: "He was a scientific philosopher and so he could not sing like Kabir endlessly. Hence we have a limited number of poems from his pen" (Mathur 1949 : 266). V.N.Bhushan says, "Swami Vivekananda is not a poet in the conventional sense of the word but belongs to the category of singer saints - Kabir, Chaitanya, Tukkaram and Nanak" (Bhushan 1945 : 134). What S.V. Joga Rao says is, "Great souls immersed in Bhakthi and philosophy are themselves at times overcome with a feeling of aesthetic ecstasy while writing poetry. Their statements look like a Gospel for others [.........] When the poets intend preaching
philosophy with poetic fervour, others derive the experience of Absolute Bliss. Here lives the secret of all mystic poetry. Many Vedic poets and Sufi poet have given us the key to the mystic experience and Swami Vivekananda stands on par with them (Rao 1964 : 76).

Romain Rolland wonders what intensity of thought and feeling must have been in Swami Vivekananda that culminated in some of his powerful poems.

"His words are great magic phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are though the pages of books, at thirty years distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electrical shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero" (Rolland 1984 : 146).

Regarding the source of inspiration for such religious verse, Joga Rao has this speculation to make. "All good poetry or great philosophy is the manifestation of 'Viveka' culminating in 'Ananda'. In fact that kind of philosophy and poetry is the spring of his (Vivekananda's) inspiration" (Rao 1964 : 79). But C.T.K. Chari's words are more sure and more enlightening. "Dante said that the function of the great poet is to be the scribe of Eternal Love. From Swami Vivekananda we may learn that to be the scribe of eternal love is to pledge to Eternal Wisdom" (Chari 1953: 79). The 'Eternal Wisdom' spoken of above is a natural by-product of or sequence to high degrees of true spirit of religion or Religion in the poet.