CHAPTER - 2
LIFE AND WORK OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA - A BRIEF PROFILE

The history of Swami Vivekananda's life is co-related ' with the awakening of India. In the paragraphs to follow, a brief account of his life is made to understand, how much agony and suffering that mighty soul had to undergo before he was able to set in motion a machinery, which was to bring about an all round awakening in Indian national life! A nation that seemed to have lost all self-respect and self-confidence and was apparently dead had to be roused. That was a tremendous task and Vivekananda was to accomplish it in a short span of life (his real activities covered a period of not more than nine years). A brief study is made here of his life:

BIRTH & PARENTAGE

Swami Vivekananda was born to Vishwanath Dutta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi in Calcutta, on Monday, 12 January, 1863 The mother had prayed to Vireshwara Shiva in Varanasi for a son. The boy, regarded as the fulfillment of her prayers, was named Vireshwara, Bileh for short. Later he came to be called Narendranath or Naren.

The Dutta family was rich, respectable and renowned for charity, learning and a strong spirit of independence. Naren's grandfather Durgacharan Dutta, well versed in Persian and Sanskrit and skilled in law, renounced the world to become a monk, at the age of twenty five years.

Vishwanath Dutta, an attorney-at-law in the Calcutta High Court, was proficient in Bengali, English, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Sanskrit, charitable to an extravagant degree, sympathetic towards the poor, along with rational and progressive outlook. Bhuvaneshwari Devi was a very intelligent and pious lady.

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

In his early childhood Naren was restless.
"Bribes, threats, everything was tried - nothing was of any avail. Finally, Bhuvaneshwari found that if she poured cold water on the head of the screaming child, chanting the name of Shiva in his ears at the same time, or if she threatened him with, 'Shiva will not let you go to Kailash, if you do not behave', he would quiet down and become his eager, joyous self again."

Worshipping or meditating on the images of Ram-Sita, Shiva etc. was his favourite play. Traits such as courage, impatience with superstition, kindness towards the poor, admiration for the wandering monks, appeared spontaneously in him.

His school education began at the age of six. (He was soon noticed there for his exceptional intelligence. He asserted himself as leader among his fellows. In 1871, when Narendra was eight years old Narendra joined in class 9th (equivalent to the present primary class two) in the English Department of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Metropolitan Institution. He was the foremost student in his class. He could memorize a book by reading it just once, so he had long hours left for fun. He was full of force and vitality, fond of play and boyish delight. By the time Naren had passed the Entrance Examination, he had acquired extensive knowledge. He was well trained in music and equally good at sports. In the words of Romain Rolland

"His super powerful body and too vast brain were predestined battlefield for all the shocks of his storm-tossed soul."  

He passed Bachelor of Arts Examination in 1884 from General Assembly's Institution, founded by the Scottish General Missionary Board, now known as the Scottish Church College. His college days were marked by tremendous spiritual ferment and spiritual upheaval. He acquired a through grasp of History, Psychology, Logic and Philosophy of India as well as of West. His mind became intensely analytical. The inward spiritual urge also became very strong now. As the days passed, the question of the existence of God very much haunted his mind. He tried to get the way in Brahmo Samaj movement, but soon found its aims superficial. Finally, he met Sri Ramakrishna in 1881.
"Bribes, threats, everything was tried - nothing was of any avail. Finally, Bhuvaneshwari found that if she poured cold water on the head of the screaming child, chanting the name of Shiva in his ears at the same time, or if she threatened him with, 'Shiva will not let you go to Kailash, if you do not behave', he would quiet down and become his eager, joyous self again."

Worshipping or meditating on the images of Ram-Sita, Shiva etc. was his favourite play. Traits such as courage, impatience with superstition, kindness towards the poor, admiration for the wandering monks, appeared spontaneously in him.

His school education began at the age of six. (He was soon noticed there for his exceptional intelligence. He asserted himself as leader among his fellows. In 1871, when Narendra was eight years old Narendra joined in class 9th (equivalent to the present primary class two) in the English Department of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Metropolitan Institution. He was the foremost student in his class. He could memorize a book by reading it just once, so he had long hours left for fun. He was full of force and vitality, fond of play and boyish delight. By the time Naren had passed the Entrance Examination, he had acquired extensive knowledge. He was well trained in music and equally good at sports. In the words of Romain Rolland

"His super powerful body and too vast brain were predestined battlefield for all the shocks of his storm-tossed soul."  

He passed Bachelor of Arts Examination in 1884 from General Assembly's Institution, founded by the Scottish General Missionary Board, now known as the Scottish Church College. His college days were marked by tremendous spiritual ferment and spiritual upheaval. He acquired a through grasp of History, Psychology, Logic and Philosophy of India as well as of West. His mind became intensely analytical. The inward spiritual urge also became very strong now. As the days passed, the question of the existence of God very much haunted his mind. He tried to get the way in Brahma Samaj movement, but soon found its aims superficial. Finally, he met Sri Ramakrishna in 1881.
SAINT IN THE MAKING

Sri Ramakrishna was a priest of Kali temple at Dakshineshwar, some four miles to the north of Calcutta. At their first meeting Sri Ramakrishna instantly knew that Naren was the one, who was to carry his message to the world. Ramakrishna addressed him most tenderly as one long familiar to him. He called him the ancient sage, Narayana, born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind and so on. In his next visit Naren asked Sri Ramakrishna the question, which he had asked so often to many others that had he seen God. To this Sri Ramakrishna replied

"see Him just as I see you here, only in a much in tenser sense"3

For the first time Narendra found a man who dared to say that he had seen God, that religion was a reality to be felt. But he could not reconcile his words with his strange conduct. Though his simplicity and love for God impressed Naren, his idiosyncrasies made him suspect if Ramakrishna was not a monomaniac.

While Ramakrishna tested Naren in so many ways, Naren in turn began to watch him from close quarters and after a long time was left in no doubt that Ramakrishna was an extraordinary man. He accepted Ramakrishna as his master. Ramakrishna directed him from doubt to certainty and from fomentation to spiritual bliss.

In 1885, Ramakrishna was moved to Cossipore, on the outskirts of Calcutta, for his treatment. His young disciplines gathered there to nurse him. They spent their time in studies, devotional music and spiritual discussion. Sri Ramakrishna utilized this opportunity to bring his young disciples under the leadership of Narendra.

"The blazing fire of Naren’s personality by its heat welded the heterogeneous whole of one body and one soul, as it were. They were twelve in number, everyone of them a tower of strength in consecration and single minded devotion. Their names were Narendra, Rokhal, Baburam, Niranjan, Yogan, Latu, Tarak, Gopal Senior, Kali, Shashi, Sharat, and Gopal Junior. "4
Though Narendra wished to be merged in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, but Sri Ramakrishna admonished him, saying that he should not be satisfied with personal bliss, but be like a banyan tree sheltering thousands from the scorching misery of life. Having destined Narendra for a mission of the spiritual regeneration of India and the world, Sri Ramakrishna passed into final Samadhi on 16th August, 1886. The hearts of the young disciples were enveloped in unutterable gloom.

In the words of Swami Gambhirananda

"They had no money and their wild dreams found very little support."

The position at the time was described in a letter, written in 1895, by Vivekananda to his brother disciple Brahmananda in which he said that

"You remember, I suppose, how after Shri Ramakrishna's passing away, all forsook us as so many worthless, ragged boys."

Somehow, many of the young disciples managed to stay together in an old dilapidated house at Baranagore, under the leadership of Narendra. To carry on the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna, they resolved to renounce the world. In January, 1887, they took the monastic vow in the prescribed fashion. They faced starvation and endured much physical and mental suffering. Recalling those days, Vivekananda said later

"It is a sacrifice. Let it be done. No great thing can be done without sacrifice. The heart must be plucked out and the bleeding heart placed upon the alter. Then great things are done. Is there any other way? None have found it.”

This was the spirit that sustained these fiery souls in those days of desolation. So rapt were they in their desire to follow in the steps of their master that forgetting everything, they spent their time in study and spiritual practices. Gradually, the call of the wandering life of the Sannyasin was felt by most of the monks. Prior to mid 1890, Narendra too left Baranagore Math, though only for short visits. He parted finally from his brethren in July of 1890.
THE CALL OF THE EARTH TO THE WANDERING MONK

Like a great diver Narendra dived deep into the ocean of India. From the close of 1888 till the May 1893, he went to various places of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Mysore, Kerala, Madras and Hyderabad. His wanderings through the whole of India, often on foot, gave him first hand knowledge of India and her people. He realized the glory of ancient India. In the midst of this great education, the terrible poverty and misery of the masses caused his soul to burn in agony. According to Romain Rolland,

"he saw with his own eyes and touched with his own hands the miserable and glorious body of humanity — his mother India in all her tragic nakedness."

At the end of his journey Narendra reached Kanyakumari. There sitting on the last rock of India, he went into deep meditation. The pictures of past, present and future of India passed before his mind's eye. He meditated on the causes of the degradation of the Indian masses, and then took the momentous decision to go to the United States to seek help for the regeneration of his countrymen.

CHICAGO-VISIT OF THE CYCLONIC SAINT

On 31st May, 1893 Narendra sailed from Bombay to attend the Chicago Parliament of Religions. At the moment of departure he put on the name of Vivekananda, which he was to impose upon the world.

Suffering did not leave him even in America as his money was running short; he had no invitation to attend the parliament and he reached there in July only to find that the Parliament opening had been postponed till September. However, he fought against the impossibilities without loosing his courage.

On September 11, 1893 in the first session of Parliament of Religions, Vivekananda's speech fired the soul of the listening throng. Hardly had he pronounced the very simple opening words, "Sisters and Brothers of America!" than the audience arose in their seats and shouted with joy. An eyewitness Mrs. S. K. Blodgett of, later recalled
"When that young man got up and said, 'Sisters and Brothers of America', seven thousand people rose to their feet as a tribute to something they knew not what."9

They cheered and cheered. The president had difficulty in controlling them. When quiet prevailed, Vivekananda made a breathtaking speech. All the subsequent speeches of Vivekananda at the parliament were listened to with great respect and appreciation. The press rang with his fame. The 'New York Herald' spoke of him in these words

"He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation. "10

The Boston Evening Transcript' wrote of him on September 30, 1893

"He is a great favourite at the Parliament from the grandeur of his sentiments and his appearance as well. If he merely crosses the Platform he is applauded."11

The honourable Merwin Marie Snell, President of the scientific section of the Parliament, wrote

"The people thronged about him wherever he went and hung with eagerness on his every word .... The most rigid of orthodox christians say of him, "He is indeed a prince among men."12

Other leading newspapers of United States and India, well known periodicals were eloquent about Vivekananda. Hundreds of enlightened and liberal minded persons Emersonians, Transcendentalists, Neo-Christians, Theosophists, Universalists, Congregationalists felt him to be another oriental master with a new message.

His stay in the West, which lasted till December 1896, was packed with intense activity. Besides giving lectures and taking classes, he founded a Vedanta Society in New York. He gave training to a group of close disciples at the Thousand Island Park. He paid two successful visits to England. From London he started for
India at the end of 1896. Besides his American and English disciples, he left behind his brother disciples, Saradananda and Abhedananda, to carry on his work. Vivekananda landed in Ceylon on 15 January, 1897. From there his journey to Calcutta was a triumphant progress.

**TOWARDS THE REALIZATION OF IDEALS**

From America Vivekananda had started writing to his brother disciples to motivate them for putting into effect his plan. In his letters one recurring command was to serve the poor, in a letter addressed to Swami Akhandananda, in 1894 he wrote

"No good will come out of sitting idle and having princely dishes and saying "Ramakrishna, O Lord." ...The gerua robe is not for enjoyment. It is the banner of heroic work. You must give your body, mind and speech to the welfare of the world."\(^{13}\)

These unconventional ideas of Hindu monasticism and its purpose flowed from Vivekananda's pen with irresistible force. The Hindu monasticism that he envisioned was to be organized. So after returning India 1st May, 1897, he called a meeting of the monastic and householder disciples of Ramakrishna in order to establish their work on an organized basis. Vivekananda proposed an integration of educational, philanthropic and religious activities, and it was thus that the Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Math came into existence. The former lays emphasis on spiritual development of the people and the latter gives priority to welfare work. In the words of Swami Budhananda

"The Math gives the movement vertical ascension, the Mission, horizontal diffusion. The former gives it spiritual stability, that tatter humanitarian dynamism\(^{14}\)

After a few shifts in location, at last, the place now known as Belur Math on the western bank of the Ganga opposite Calcutta, became the Headquarter of the Ramakrishna order on 1 January, 1899.
Despite his failing health, Vivekananda engaged himself in numerous activities and trained his Western disciples, especially Sister Nivedita. Sister Nivedita opened a Girls' school. In 1899, Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati (Almora) was founded. The Bengali monthly 'Udbodhan' and English monthly 'Prabuddha Bharata' were also started.

ACROSS THE WORLD AGAIN

In June 1899, Vivekananda sailed for a second visit to the Western world, with Swami Turiyananda and Sister Nivedita. The journey with Vivekananda was a great education to both of them. Sister Nivedita wrote

"From the beginning of the voyage to the end, the flow of thought and story went on. One never knew what moment would see the flash of intuition, and hear the ringing utterance of some fresh truth." 15

They visited London, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, Paris, Hungary, Rumania, Serbia; Bulgaria, Constantinople, Athens and Cairo. The main event of the period was starting of the Shanti Ashrama in Northern California and Vedanta Centre at San Francisco. He returned to India in December 1900.

Now his soul was also soaring towards wider horizons. He kept on unfolding his schemes for future-work but freed himself entirely from all formal duties. Longing only for the peace of contemplation he departed on 4th July, 1902.

He lived only a very brief life of thirty-nine years and seven months, but he lived intensely and left an indelible mark on social history.

PERSONALITY-PROFILE

It has been rightly said that

"Swami Vivekananda was not a man but a Movement. He was not a person but a phenomenon." 16
His majestic appearance is very well narrated by Romain Rolland that

"He was tall (five feet eight and a half inches), square shouldered, broad chested, stout, rather heavily built, his arms were muscular and trained to all kinds of sports. He had an olive complexion, a full face, vast forehead, strong jaw, a pair of magnificent eyes, large, dark and rather prominent with heavy lids, whose shape recalled the classic comparison to a lotus petal. Nothing escaped the magic of his glance.... his pre-eminent characteristic was kingliness."17

He was different from the saints, this land had seen. Mrs. Annie Besant called him 'Warrior Saint'. In America he was frequently referred as 'Cyclonic Hindu', or 'Rajah Monk'. Undoubtedly, Vivekananda had a multidimensional cyclonic personality. It would be clear by highlighting the following traits of his personality.

Vivekananda is highly hailed as a patriot saint. He exhorted his countrymen to dedicate their all to serve nation. Almost all the great leaders of Indian freedom movement drew inspiration from Vivekananda's fiery message. Expressing his feelings for India, his disciple Sister Christine said

"Our love for India came to birth, I think, when we first heard him say the word, "India", in that marvelous voice of his. It seems incredible that so much could have been put into one small word of five letters. There was love, passion, pride, longing, adoration, tragedy, chivalry and again love. Whole volumes could not have produced such a feeling in others."18

Vivekananda often described himself as 'Condensed India'. It is Vivekananda as a prophet that appeals to the heart of non-Indians. His prophetic eyes could peep into the past, present and future. His mission was very clear to him, that

"The dry, abstract Advaita must become living-poetic-in every day life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put in a foremost that a child may grasp it That is my life's work,"19

26
Yogendra Duraj Swami, Vice-president of World Hindu Federation said on the centenary of Vivekananda’s Chicago address

"He appeared on our horizon glittering like a morning star, full of life, vision and joy. ...He is indeed the prophet of our age."  

Vivekananda took interest in total human development everywhere. He was the lover of the poor, the suffering, the neglected. He once fed the Santhal labourers sumptuously at Belur Math and said to the monks of the Ramakrishna, and order that

"See how simple-hearted these poor illiterate people are! Can you mitigate their misery a little? If not, of what use is your wearing the ochre-robe?"

The Spiritualism propounded by Vivekananda is intensely human and universal. But it is also something more than human; for it derives its strength and sanction, from the ever present and inalienable divine spark in all men and women and that constitutes its uniqueness.

He believed in non-dualist philosophy of Vedanta. The goal according to his philosophy is to realize the truth that 'I am He (God)'. The most striking note of Vivekananda’s philosophy is carrying out the Advaita Vedanta system into practice. He emphasized on taking the sinking millions of India by hand. He preached the practical Vedanta to everyone, so that religion may withstand the shock of modern science. In his life and message is found a happy union of the ethical idealism of Buddha and spiritual idealism of Sankara.

Vivekananda’s sayings on educational planning are as inspiring as the rest. He considered education as the manifestation of the perfection already in man. His most striking point as an educationist is to motivate the sannyasins to carry education to every home, not only to preach religion but also to teach History, Geography, Science, Literature, Trade, Commerce, Agriculture etc. to the ignorant Indian masses.

Vivekananda was a unique reformer. He said that he did not believe in reform, but he believed in growth, expansion, development on national lines. Vivekananda felt that the reformer must go down to the basis of things to the very root of the matter. That is what he called radical reform. Instead of frittering away the energies
on social reforms, they should educate the people so that people may be able to solve their own problems. Vivekananda emphasized that until that is done, all ideal reforms are to be remained ideals only.

Many scholars have called Vivekananda, the first socialist. Vivekananda believed that no system can have strong and enduring foundation unless it is built on spirituality. His statement that,

"I am a socialist, not because I think it is a perfect system, but Infra loaf is better than no bread"^22

Is often misunderstood. When he spoke about Socialism, he did not think of socialism on the material plane, as in the West. He wanted the society to have "moral and spiritual regeneration. He believed that economic reform alone cannot bring about socialism, so he gave the gospel of equality and the gospel of social raising up. Uplift of the masses and uplift of women will be the real content of equality. Formerly Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court said that

"Vivekananda was the first amongst us who was convinced that the key to all the problems of India and that of the world, of all Its disharmony and discord lies in socialist order tempered with spiritual thought. Following Vivekananda's teachings we have also, in our National Charter resolved to constitute India into a Socialist Republic"^23

Right from his childhood Vivekananda was a natural leader. Sri Ramakrishna realized his potential and established him as an undisputed leader among his disciples. After the departure of Sri Ramakrishna, he successfully united his brother disciples to fulfill the dream of his master. When his brother disciples saw the prophecy of their master about the greatness of Narendra, coming true in America, their elation knew no bounds. According to Swami Gambhirananda

"Born leader, that he was, Swami Vivekananda was careful not to allow this enthusiasm to spend itself in sentimental outbursts; rather he was eager to direct it into useful and constructive channels."^24
He successfully exercised his power of leadership for planning and molding the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Vivekananda is frequently referred to as a lightening orator. The 'Critic' newspaper of New York, spoke of him as

"An orator by Divine right."^25

His attractive personality drew the attention of everybody and when he spoke, the power was doubled. He created the greatest stir at 'Chicago Parliament of Religions' with his fiery speeches. He employed his oratory for propagating his philosophy of practical Vedanta and oneness of humanity, from one end of the world to the other. Undoubtedly, he had the voice of thunder.

Vivekananda was an efficient writer. He wrote a number of articles, which were published in magazines and newspapers. The range of his subjects was extensive. His "style is marked by a vigour and vehemence which is often almost volcanic."^26

The book written by him is The East and the West'. His books on four Yogas, 'Jnana Yoga', 'Karma Yoga', 'Bhakti Yoga', 'Raj Yoga' are remarkable. They are compiled from his writings and speeches. All his speeches, writings & discourses are compiled in the nine huge-sized volumes.

Vivekananda composed a large number of beautiful poems in Bengali and English language, which are now compiled under the title of 'in Search of God and Other Poems". These poems show his remarkable power of expressing thought, beautiful colours of imagination and command over the language. They may be described as lava of imagination. Later in life he composed several songs, hymns that are now used in religious worship by the devotees of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

Vivekananda loved music and was adept in it. He could sing, dance and play several musical instrument with outstanding skill. Everybody was charmed by the musical sweetness of his voice. Sri Ramakrishna used to go into ecstasy while listening to his songs.
"Not only was Narendranath a great musician he was as well an authentic theoretician of music this fact is proved by a tretise on music entitled 'Sangita Kalptaru' in Bengali published by Sri Chandi Charan Basak in 1887, this book was mostly compiled by Narendranath and latter completed by Vaishnav Charan Basak."^{27}

We have already mentioned that Naren was the leader among his fellow Indeed leadership was innate in him, and very early in life he demonstrated the truth that leadership means self-sacrifice. One day when he was about six years old, he went with a younger relative to a Charhak fair at which Lord Shiva is worshipped. He purchased some doll-images of Shiva at the fair, and as the two boys were returning home in the dusk, they became slightly separated in the crowd. At that moment a carriage came dashing along. Naren, who thought his companion was immediately behind him, turned at the noise and to his horror saw that it was a question of life or death for the little lad, who stood terrified in the middle of the road about to be run over. Putting his dolls underneath his left arm Naren rushed to the lad's help, heedless of his own safety, and grabbing him with his right hand, pulled him almost from under the horses' hoofs. Those close by were wonderstruck. The danger had appeared so suddenly that there was little chance for another to have run to the small boy's assistance. Some patted Naren on the back, while others blessed him; and when, on his return home, his mother heard the story, she wept for happiness and said, "Always be a man, my son!"^{28}

There were those who saw marks of Naren's future greatness even at this time. In the year 1869, Kaliprasad, Naren's grand-uncle and once the head of the Datta house, lay on his deathbed. When he found that he was to live but a few hours more, he called in his whole family, and then asked any one of the children to read to him passages from the Mahabharata, so that his soul could pass on to another sphere with the thoughts contained in that great epic. All except Naren and one of his sisters felt too shy to read aloud to the dying elder. So Naren took up the heavy volume and placing it on his lap, turned page after page, while his voice, loud and clear, rang with the glories of the heroes and the Lord. As he was reading that particular portion where Garuda flew off with his mother Vinata on his shoulders, which symbolizes the soul's rising on the wings of knowledge to blessedness, the breathing of Kaliprasad became
slower and slower. Then he spoke in an undertone—yet with all the burning certainty of vision that the dying sometimes show "Child, you have a great future before you."

Having uttered these words his soul passed out into higher spheres.

There is a saying, morning shows the day. Likewise by observing the sum total of qualities manifested in a child one can have a preview of the life that is yet to be. About Naren one can say that the morning of his life was auspicious indeed! With his well-shaped graceful form, fair complexion, large bright eyes, and face bearing the impress of budding genius, he naturally attracted everyones. His mind filled with a hundred soaring visions, heart soaked in affection, intellect razor-sharp, courage boundless," inventive genius astounding, working capacity unreckoned, and enthusiasm irrepressible--Naren was peerless even from childhood. Above all was his spontaneous inclination towards God. From his very childhood he was an adept in meditation, and had delight in worship, prayer, and search for God. When we have deeply studied his life, we shall find ourselves having to admit that the foregoing account of Narendranath is not only not exaggerated, but is rather a pale representation of the truth.

Those who are to change the thought of the world as did Plato and Aristotle, or alter its destinies as did Alexander and Caesar, are from their childhood conscious of their power; they are instinctively aware of the greatness which is to come. Narendranath, too, felt the spirit of greatness within him; he saw things to which others of his age were blind, and he felt already, in the feeble and yet certain way of a child, the struggle which was to be his in giving expression to his vision.
REFERENCES

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.