CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda is one of the greatest religious leaders and thinkers of modern India. The present research is a fresh study of the speeches of Swami Vivekananda in a literary perspective. It is well known that the family background has always been of prime importance in shaping the future of a child. The life of a writer or orator invariably gives an insight into his works. A peep into the life of Swami Vivekananda is a prerequisite for a peep into his works. This chapter centres round the personality and writings of Swami Vivekananda and evaluates the formative influences on him, to show the evolution of a man and a saint as well as the emergence of a literary giant.

Bhuvaneshwari Devi had a dream one night. She dreamt that Lord Shiva, in response to her fervent prayers, agreed to be born as her son. So when on January 12, 1863 a boy was born into the Datta family, they appropriately named him Vireshwara. The boy’s formal
name was Narendranath or, more endearingly, Naren. It was Naren who was to be distinguished later as Swami Vivekananda. In the physical, mental and spiritual power, he was exceptionally gifted.

The popular book entitled *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* by his Eastern and Western disciples portrays his childhood in these words:

Narendranath was a naughty child, subject to fits of restlessness during which he was beyond control. At such times he would wear the family out. Bribes, threats, everything was tried – nothing was of any avail.

*(Life I : 48)*

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. It was after such scenes that the mother used to say that she prayed to Shiva for a son and he sent her one of his demons.

Narendranath’s family was well known for its affluence, charity, scholarship and independent spirit. His father Vishwanath Datta was a successful attorney at Calcutta High Court. The spirit of
renunciation was also a family tradition Vishwanath Datta’s father Durgacharan, had renounced the material world in search of God.

There was in Narendranath’s home an atmosphere of intellectual and spiritual stimulation. He grew up listening to discussions on art, culture, music and literature, and to stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. His mother kept in her memory long passages from the Hindu scriptures, and it was from her that he first heard the great religious epics of India. It was thus that he caught some of the prophetic fire and force which he exhibited later.

Naren’s education began at the feet of his mother from whom he learnt the Bengali alphabets and the first English words. His childlike imagination very often travelled back to the hallowed days of the epic era when he listened with rapt attention to the romantic tales of the Ramayana told by his mother. His Eastern and Western disciples write:

The first seed of spiritual life was sown during this period of Naren’s early education. Again and again he had heard of Ramanand sites. He had listened enrapt to readings from the Ramayana, and had followed the
long story of Rama's struggle and conquest with all the thrill of personal adventure. (*Life* I:12)

He observed the elder members of the family sitting in worship and meditation, and it occurred to him that he, too, should worship Rama. One day, he and a little Brahmin boy named Hari purchased a clay image of Sita-Rama, and when no one was about, they climbed the stairs that led to a room on the roof above the women's quarters. After securely closing the door, they installed the image, and sat down to meditate. Meanwhile, parents of both the boys noticed their prolonged absence, and an anxious search for them was begun. The hunt led at last to the little locked room on the roof. The searchers knocked and shouted, but there was no response. At last their strong blows smashed the latch, and the door flew open. Hari, his meditation disturbed at the first ominous signal, fled down the stairs. His Eastern and Western disciples write:

> But Naren had not heard anything. He was seated before the flower decked image, motionless in deep meditation. When he did not respond on being called by name, he was shaken out of his meditation, but he insisted on being left alone. So they let him remain, knowing not
what to make of it all; for it seemed strange at his age.

*(Life I:12)*

Narendra grew up to be a sweet, sunny-tempered, but very restless boy. Two nurses were necessary to keep his exuberant energy under control. In order to quiet him the mother often put his head under the cold-water tap, repeating Siva’s name which always produced desired effect. Naren felt a child’s love for birds and animals, and this characteristic reappeared during the last days of his life. Among his boyhood pets were a family cow, a monkey, a goat, a peacock and several pigeons and guinea-pigs.

As years rolled on, at the age of six, Naren started going to school. Within a year, he memorized almost the whole of the *Mugdhabodha*, the Sanskrit Grammar, as well as passages of great length from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In 1871, he was admitted to the Metropolitan Institution founded by Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Teachers and classmates at once recognized his exceptional intelligence. He was not only a good student but also a good player. His memory and intelligence were superb. He was able to reproduce the whole lesson taught to him. Such was his memory as he remembered and stored in his memory what he read only
once. The curriculum took little of his time and he was left with plenty of time and energy to carry out his extra curricular activities. Mahendra Kulsrestha in *A Colossus Named Vivekananda* writes.

His childhood and boyhood were those of a young artist prince of the Renaissance. He was gifted with a multiplicity of talents, and cultivated them all he had a leanine beauty and the lithe grace of a fawn. The possessor of physical courage and the build of an athlete, he was a past master in all physical exercises. He could box, swim, row and had a passion for horses. He was the favourite of youth and the arbiter of fashion. He danced the great religious dances with consummate art, and had a delightful voice, which later was to charm the ear of Ramakrishna. He studied vocal and instrumental music for four or five years under famous Hindu and Muslim professors. (26)

Narendra received education according to the standards of the age. He did not distinguish himself either at school or at college, but he exhibited some rare traits from the beginning of his student career. He did not devote much attention to the study of prescribed
text-books, but was a voracious reader of books in different branches of knowledge; Such was his concentration of mind as he easily passed his examinations by merely devoting a few months to the reading of the prescribed texts. In 1879, he got through the entrance examination and entered Presidency College. This was the turning point in his life as he stepped into ‘a world of new ideas and experiences.’ In F.A. his subjects were English, History, Mathematics, Logic and Psychology. He passed the F.A. examination in second division in 1881. He retained the same subjects in B.A. except one change – Philosophy in place of Logic and Psychology. He graduated in 1884. He was a dedicated student of Philosophy and Literature and made great head-way in the art of composition and history of different nations. His deep study of the western philosophers like Mill, Hume, Descartes, Darwin and Spencer, and his knowledge of the scientific methods and discoveries in Europe wrought a great change in his life. Two distinct trends are noticed in his new outlook. Though born and brought up in an orthodox Hindu family, he could not reconcile with the traditional faith in Hindu gods and goddesses, and the mode of their worship. At the same time, far from being an atheist or sceptic,
he had a strong religious bent of mind and never lost faith in the existence of God. The result was an earnest search on his part, in a true scientific spirit, for the unknown ultimate reality or God. This was a very critical moment in the life of Narendranath, which was destined to shape his future. He was a genius and wizard of learning beyond comparison. The Principal of the College William Hastie remarked:

Narendranath is really a genius I have travelled far and wide but I have never yet come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German Universities, amongst philosophical students. He is bound to make his mark in life! (Life I : 48)

In these days, his mind underwent a psychological transformation. He became intensely analytical and ‘subordinated imagination to the demands of reason’ He subjected, tradition, religion and beliefs to severe analysis, and he was leaning towards God. He drew aesthetic pleasure in devotional songs. He was not only a musician but also a ‘theoretician’ as is reflected in his first treatise Sangita – Kalptaru.
His formal education came to an end after graduation and a new intense spiritual education began under the leadership of Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa – the Indian Swan. During this period, there were three popular movements – The Brahma – Samaj, The Arya Samaj and The Theosophical Society. Of these three movements, the Brahma-Samaj made a strong appeal to the imagination of young Bengal. Naren was also influenced by it and became a member of it. This influence was particularly due to his intellectual outlook. He never agreed to admit a thing without understanding it. He was vehemently against superstitions. He was a staunch supporter of social reform. He had a keen desire to participate in the progress of his country. All these tendencies took him to Brahma-Samaj. However, gradually he became dis-satisfied, and he naturally sought for some other avenues to get nearer the truth, the realization of which now became the burning passion of his life. In his earnest longing to realize the truth he once went to Maharshi Devendranath Tagore who was regarded by many at the time as highly advanced in spiritual matters, Naren questioned Maharshi with all sincerity, “Have you seen God?” He did not receive any satisfactory answer and came away disappointed. At this
moment of bewilderment, he remembered the words of Professor William Hastie, who had mentioned that a saint lived at Dakshineswar, just outside Calcutta, who experienced the ecstasy described by Wordsworth in his poem, "The Excursion".

In November 1881, he first met Ramakrishna at the house of Shri Surendranath Mitra. The first meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Narendranath at Dakshineswar was of tremendous significance. With tears of joy rolling down his cheeks Ramakrishna said to Narendranath: "Ah! You have come so late How unkind of you to keep me waiting so long!" Ramakrishna alluded to his own belief that Narendranath was the incarnation of Narayana, fed him sweets with his own hands and asked him to visit Dakshineswar again. In Ramakrishna, the modern age finds an answer to all the quarrels among different religions. He practised all religions and reached the same truth- God. He saw divine mother even in his wife. In this meeting Narendra swayed his master into ecstasy by the spiritual melody of his song.

Let us go back once more,

O mind, to our proper home!

Here in this foreign land of earth
Why should we wander aimlessly
In stranger’s guise? (Nikhilananda, *Biography* 31)

This was not his own composition. It was the song used to be sung in Brahmo Smaj. At this age Naren under the influence of science, had grown into a sceptic who wanted to achieve God, if there was any, to verify everything. The whole attitude of Ramakrishna was beyond the comprehension of Narendra. He put forth his favourite question:

‘Have you seen God, Sir?’ “yes, I see Him” just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.” “God can be realized”, he went on; ‘one can see and talk to Him as I am seeing And talking to you.’

(*Life* I:77)

Ramakrishna said to the other devotees:

‘See! How Naren beams with the light of Saraswati (the Goddess of learning)’! Those who heard him say this looked upon Naren with wonder. Not only was it strange that the master should speak thus, it was still more strange that he should have seen such profound spirituality in the boy. ‘Do you see a light before falling asleep?’ asked Shri Ramakrishna. Narendra said, ‘yes,
The Master cried, 'Ah! everything is tallying. He is a Dhyana-Siddha [an adept in meditation] even from his very birth.' (Life I : 77)

It was soon after they had first met that Ramakrishna asked Narendra this question, and his reply provided the master with a deep insight into the parts, the nature, and the destiny of this remarkable youngster who would later become Swami Vivekananda. In his later years he himself described this supernatural faculty.

From the earliest times that I can remember, I used to see a marvellous point of light between my eyebrows as soon as I shut my eyes to go to sleep, and I used to watch its various changes with great attention... That marvellous point of light would change colour and get bigger until it took the form of a ball; finally it would burst and cover my body from head to foot with white liquid light. As soon as that happened, It would lose outer consciousness and fall asleep. I used to believe that was the way everybody went to sleep. Then, when I grew older and began to practise meditation, that point
of light would appear to me as soon as I closed my eyes, and I’d concentrate upon it...(Ramakrishna 188)

Sri Ramakrishna knew that this sort of vision indicated to a remarkable spiritual part – especially a habit of meditation derived from previous lives. It further confirmed his original intuitive recognition of Narendra’s potential greatness and power. Once he was meditating with his playmates when a cobra appeared. The other boys were frightened and, shouting a warning to him, ran away. But Narendra remained motionless, and the cobra after lingering about for a while crawled away. Later Narendra told his parents: ‘I knew nothing of the snake or anything else. I was feeling inexpressible joy.’

At the age of fifteen he experienced spiritual ecstasy when he was journeying with his family to Raipur in central India. His mind was filled with awe and reverence for the Divine providence and he lost outer consciousness. Perhaps this was the first time that his powerful imagination had helped him to ascend into the realm of the super conscious. Once during his days as a student, Vivekananda had a vision of Buddha which he related thus:
While at school one night I was meditating within closed doors and had a fairly deep concentration of mind. How long I meditated in that way, I cannot say. It was over, and I still kept my seat, when from the southern wall of that room a luminous figure stepped out and stood in front of me... It was the figure of a sannyasin absolutely calm, shaven headed, and staff and kamandalu (water-bowl) in hand. He gazed at me for some time, and seemed as if he would address me. I too gazed at him in speechless wonder. Then a kind of fright seized me, I opened the door and hurried out of the room. Then it struck me that it was foolish of me to run away like that, that perhaps he might say something to me. But I have never met that figure since... I now think it was the Lord Buddha whom I saw. (Works VII: 59)

But Ramakrishna by his wonderful touch, at one of their first meeting, gave Narendra a taste of transcendental consciousness, banishing duality from his mind.

While he was graduating, his father suddenly died and left the family burdened with a heavy debt as he had lived beyond his
means. To add to his grief, creditors, like hungry wolves, began to prowl about the door and his relatives brought a suit for the partition of ancestral home. The responsibility of the family fell on his shoulders, and he wandered about to find a Job. Friends turned into foes and well — wishers slammed their doors in his face. Like Buddha, he experienced that everywhere there is suffering in the world. This led him to the resolve to remove sufferings of his countrymen. This also increased his faith in Ramakrishna. Vivekananda says:

I almost died of hunger. Barefoot I wandered from office to office, repulsed on all sides. This was my first contact with the realities of life. I discovered that it had no room for the weak, the poor, the deserted. Those who several days before would have been proud to help me, turned away their faces, although they possessed the means to do so. The world seemed to me to be the creation of a devil. (Kulsrestha, Colossus 40 )

He got a job in a school though he gave it up soon. His economic condition improved and he could renounce the worldly life and become a sannyasi. He foiled every attempt of his family to
get him married and remained a devout bachelor. From boyhood Narendra had shown a passion for purity. Whenever his warm and youthful nature tempted him to walk into a questionable adventure, he was held back by an unseen hand. His mother had taught him the value of chastity and had made him observe it as a matter of honour. But purity to Narendra was not a negative virtue. To be pure, he felt, was to conserve an intense spiritual force that would later manifest itself in all the noble aspirations of life. According to the Hindu scriptures, a man, by means of purity, can experience the subtlest spiritual perceptions. In Narendra it accounts for the great power of concentration, memory, and insight, and for his indomitable mental energy and physical stamina.

The boy Narendranath had become a Brahmacharin in spirit. He had accustomed himself to regard every woman, as all monks should, as “Mother”. His purpose was fixed, so far as intention and character went.

(*Life I: 58*)

He was privileged to sit at the lotus feet of his master about five years. He nursed the ailing master at a garden house at Cossipore day and night. Realizing the approaching end of his
mortal existence, the master appointed Narendra the leader of his disciples and his spiritual heir. He transmitted his whole spiritual power to Narendra to enable him to accomplish the task assigned to him by the mother On August 16, 1886, he entered into Nirvikalp Samadhi. Though he cast off his physical body, it is believed, his apparition appeared many times to help them or to instruct them. Narendra could no longer perform his duty as their leader because an intense inner conflict within him was going on. On the one hand he found it difficult to run the Barangore monastery while on the other hand his heart hankered for a wandering life. He did not want his brother disciples to be the traditional ascetics in solitary caves. They should rather broaden their outlook by assimilating the thought currents of the world. They should actively live in the world but renounce the worldliness of life.

Swamiji travelled far and wide, lived among kings and pariahs. But he failed to make a mark on the society until his genius was recognized by America. It was America which recognized his talent and highlighted it before the world and India as well. The American press recognized him as “undoubtedly the greatest figure in the parliament of religions” (Rolland, 32). Indians celebrated his victory
at the Parliament of Religions. From the Parliament, he became known by the new name Swami Vivekananda that was given to him by the King of Khetri on his departure for America.

In fact his literary contribution began with his address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago. Here, for the first time, all his speeches were recorded and noted down. He delivered twelve lectures at the plenary sessions of the Parliament and the Scientific Section, an affiliated unit of it. Most of these lectures were not written. He wrote a paper on "Hinduism" and read it at the Parliament and it proved to be an epoch-making one. Romain Rolland writes:

The effect of these mighty words was immense over the heads of the official representatives of the Parliament, they were addressed to all and appealed to outside thought. Vivekananda's fame at once spread abroad, and India as a whole benefited. (31)

During this course, Vivekananda became intimate with a number of scholars and persons of repute and influenced them immensely. Among the influenced persons, the noble ones are Professor John Henry Wright and his wife Merwin-Marie Snell,
President of the Scientific Section, Mrs. George W. Hale and others. Among the audience, very few knew anything substantial of the Hindu religion. Therefore the credit goes to Vivekananda for impregnating the minds and hearts of the Americans with the crystal thoughts and living pictures of the Universal religion— the Hinduism. This oriental scholar left a lasting impression on the minds of “the hundreds of enlightened and liberal-minded persons, Emersonians, Transcendentalists, Neochristians, Theosophists, Universalists, Congregationalists” (Life I: 429). Some of his acquaintances became his disciples and embraced Hinduism while others worshipped and adored him remaining in their homes. As far as American influence upon him is concerned, Romain Rolland maintains that he was conversant with the thoughts of the Anglo Saxon forerunners of the spirit of Asia—Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman. They were the persons who kept the Hindu thought alive in America.

After the Parliament, Swamiji undertook a series of ‘apostolic campaigns’ to spread the message of Shri RamaKrishna. In the beginning, he entered into contract with a lecture bureau. In 1894, he broke this contract and organized free course in oriental learning in a rented room. There he took up his ambitious project of writing a
treatise on Raja-Yoga. Around June 1895, he finished this book with the help of his amanuensis Miss S.E. Waldo (afterwards Sister Haridas). The book entitled *The Philosophy of Yoga (Raja-Yoga)* was published from New York in 1896. This was the first book published in his lifetime and at once brought him fame and name in the literary world. The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, Indologist Max Mueller and philosopher William James were greatly impressed by this accomplished work of art. This work alone is sufficient to establish him as a litterateur. He dictated two more treatises on Bhakti-Yoga and Karma-Yoga. Jnana-Yoga comprises his lectures delivered in London and America. From America, he went to England in December 1895. He was immensely influenced by the master of indology, Max Mueller and Paul Deussen whom he met. In America and Europe he travelled a lot, visited numerous cities, villages and important places; and met and talked to many dignitaries and commoners. The great warrior of India, having taken the world by storm, retumered to his motherland on 15th January 1897 where the jubilant countrymen passionately waited to bathe him in the heartiest welcome. But this whirlwind tour of the west had exhumed the vitals of his body. Thereafter, he remained
constantly ill. The people in India were jubilant at his success but he was weeping because all his glory and ‘treasures of soul’ could not provide him ‘three hundred million rupees necessary for his dream of the material regeneration of India’ Here again, the saviour of India was not at rest. He once again crossed the land from the South to the North. Wherever he went and whenever he spoke, he made people delirious and threw them into a state of ecstasy. The immediate need was to establish a machinery with dedicated soldiers and rich funds. He knew that if India wanted economic development, she had to harness her own resources and had not to stretch her arms for alms. He started the publication of three magazines *Prabudha Bharata* in English, *Udbodhan* and *Brahmavadin* in Bengali. On May 1, 1897, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission in his presidency. A great monastery was built at Belur. In June 1899, Swami Vivekananda set out upon his second journey to the West. After a brief stay at London, he left for America where he had founded a Vedantic center. He founded new Vedantic centers at San Francisco, Okland and Almada. At Saint Clara, he built an Ashram on the sixty acres of land offered to him. Turiyananda was deputed there to train the western disciples and students in monastic life. He
had delivered numerous lectures during this period. Some are published in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* but most of them remained unwritten. He visited Paris, Berlin, Austria, Greece, Cairo and other places. In December 1900, he returned to India and was shocked to know about the demise of Mr. Sevier at Mayavati Ashram. He rushed to the Ashram despite his decaying health, asthma and deep exhaustion. But he was happy to see the work accomplished there. He celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday. He came to Belur Math on January 24. He travelled with his mother to the holy places of Eastern Bengal, Assam, Dacca, and Shillong for the last time. On his return to Belur, he found himself almost dead, lying in death-bed. Yet he was so kind hearted and forthcoming that he set out for Bodh-Gaya on the request of a Japanese visitor Okakura. He could go only upto Varanasi where he fainted and was brought back to Belur. He achieved mahanirvan on 4th July 1902. On his departure at the age of thirty-nine, he said: ‘I have done enough for fifteen hundred years.’

Swami Vivekananda’s writings and speeches that run into nine volumes have attracted hundreds of reviewers. A number of books have been written on his thought, his philosophy of Vedanta and on
his life. In all these works two points have been predominant: his life and his philosophy. These are preoccupied with what he said rather than how he said it. This is, however, by no means intended to refute the importance of such works. But at the same time one is reminded of what T.S. Eliot insisted upon- that meaning was an element of form, that a work of art should be judged by how it is said and not by what is said. In case of the speeches of Vivekananda, one can ignore neither ‘what is said’ nor ‘how it is said’. Both must be taken together. This research is an attempt in that direction with all humility and with gratitude to those who have written, and made significant research, on him, particularly to Romain Rolland for his *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* to his Eastern and Western disciples for *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, to Nikhilananda for *Vivekananda: A Biography*, to the President Shri Ramakrishana Math, Madras for *Facets of Vivekananda*, to Marie Louise Burke for her outstanding research work *Swami Vivekananda in the West- New Discoveries* (Six Volumes), to Swami Abhedananda for his *Vivekananda and His Work*. 
Though Romain Rolland can not claim to be a detached observer, he tried his best to be objective in dealing with Swami Vivekananda and his works. He presents a graphic picture of his life and message, but leaves out the account of his childhood and his family. He does not assess his literary contribution properly. This is perhaps the only popular book on him that ventures upon making comparisons with other poets, musicians and writers. A thorough reading of the books show us that these are more the biographies of a religious-preacher and reformer rather than a writer. It is by no means only the life of the poet or the artist, that one finds in *Lives of the English Poets* by Samuel Johnson. It seems that his disciples have failed to do justice to Swami Vivekananda, the orator.

In all such evaluations of his speeches and his writings, the most obvious lack is that of literary criticism. No attempt has been made to see his works from literary point of view. His books and speeches are wonderful literary productions as David Daiches points out in his *Critical Approaches to Literature*:

Not only ‘How good is this work and why?’ and ‘How do we differentiate between the good and the less good?’ are the subjects for debate, but such matters are
discussed as the relation between works of literature and other phases of culture, psychological questions concerning the way the creative writer operates, sociological questions about the way in which his place in society affects his way of writing, semantic questions about what happens to language when it is employed in a certain way, his literary conventions, his ideas, textual and bibliographical inquiries. (175)

The present research aims at assessing the literary worth and value of his speeches.