4.1

ESSAYS AND STORIES

Swami Vivekananda wrote extensively during his short life span. Always maintaining that he had a message for the world, he used words to reach out to people of his time and beyond. He rather enjoyed the process of writing, often scribbling his thoughts on pieces of papers and even corners of envelops. During his life as a wandering monk a notebook was one of the few things he kept with him. According to an incident related by his fellow traveller, Akhandananda, once they travelled long distance on foot to the holy site of Badrikashrama in the heart of the Himalayas. When they reached Almora they decided to take a break and meditate during which Vivekananda had a spiritual experience. He immediately proceeded to jot down in his notebook what later became an essay titled *Microcosm And The Macrocosm*. Similarly he recorded several of his insights into the metaphysical in his structured, logical and organized style of writing. This stress on logic and can be traces back to his education and his study of various thinkers and writers. According to Saradananda, Vivekananda extensively studied Western philosophy during his school years between 1881 and 1884 and had also pursued a course on medicine and studying the physiology of the brain and the nervous system; and the analytic and the
scientific method of the west had conquered him, and he wished to apply it to the study of Hindu religious ideas. A person of scholarship, he continued his studies till the very end. Even when he was holding lecture classes all over America and hardly had time for anything else, he advised Alsinga, his disciple from Madras to study Sanskrit and the Bhasya on the Vedanta and send him copies of the same because he wished to write a book in English on the harmony of the three systems of the Vedanta which he believed would serve well in the West. After he passed away, his disciples and friends found many notes he had made as a preparation for a lecture or an essay. In the note later titled Fundamentals of Religion, and found in the papers of his disciple Miss S.E. Waldo, Vivekananda had jotted down very clearly the “fourfold divisions” to be employed to understand “religions of the world, ancient or modern, dead or living” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 374), which being, according to him, symbology, history, philosophy and mysticism.

Similarly his incomplete book India’s Message to the World was found with a very elaborate list of fourty-two points under the title of Syllabus. This manuscript reveals the clarity of thought and the ability of Vivekananda to break down complex issues and ideas into simpler structural forms and to lay them in writing in a way that is comprehensible
to his audience. There is a reflection of his famed oratory skill and expression as he interjects his Syllabus with the note: “This is the keynote to everything which has succeeded, and the keystone of the arch.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 310).

*India’s Message to the World* also shows the strong sense of nationalism in Vivekananda and his immense pride in the history of India. Even when the country was at its lowest, even then Vivekananda firmly believed that India had a profound message for the World:

“Bold has been my message to the people of the West, bolder is my message to you, my beloved countrymen. The message of ancient India to new Western nations I have tried my best to voice - ill done or well done the future is sure to show; but the mighty voice of the same future is already sending forward soft but distinct murmurs, gaining strength as the days go by, the message of India that is to be to India as she is at present.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 312)
Determined to awaken the sleeping divinity of India Vivekananda said that spiritualism was the essence of India and its message to the world. He writes:

“This is the theme of Indian life-work, the burden of her eternal songs, the backbone of her existence, the foundation of her being, the raison d'être of her very existence — the spiritualisation of the human race. In this her life-course she has never deviated, whether the Tartar ruled or the Turk, whether the Mogul ruled or the English.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 312).

In the essays, the free expressions are replaced by objective reasoning and facts, and the poet in Vivekananda makes way for a very organized message oriented writer aware that the column-space his writing has been allotted in the pages of The New York Times or the Metaphysical Magazine is a valuable tool for his work. His essays are expository and founded on clarity and lucidity. They are informative and encourage people to explore new ideas and stream of logic. He can also be a persuasive writer in his attempt to convince the reader but he never resorts to banal descriptions or trite arguments. The rhythm he shows in his poetic writing is reflected in his prose as well.
Vivekananda discusses issues of various natures. He writes on inscrutable topics like *Is the Soul Immortal?*, *Reincarnation*, *Macrocosm and Microcosm* and *Reason Faith and Love*. At the same time he writes pieces that promote nationalism and social work. His essays are precise and refer heavily to established scriptures and texts. Each of the pieces he has written has evidence of being result of labored work of research, analysis and introspection.

Vivekananda also wrote short biographical pieces including one on Dr. Paul Deussen, Max Muller, Ramakrishnan and Pavhari Baba. In these life sketches Vivekananda’s writing is warm and endearing, fondly recounting life of people he found fascinating. These pieces show that Vivekananda could be a connoisseur raconteur when he wanted. *On Dr Paul Deussen* which was written for an issue of *Brahmavadin* starts, true to Vivekananda’s style, with a scene that is most interesting in its composition – a German Professor of Sanskrit, teaching *Shakuntala* in an European University to a small audience which includes Dr. Deussen who goes on to become the Professor of Philosophy in the University of Keil.
Vivekananda was a natural storyteller. He punctuated his writings with short anecdotes and fables. He told short succinct parables that were laced with wit and humour.

He told stories like that of a preacher who went to the cannibals and asked them how his predecessor was, and got the answer that “he was delicious!” Another story centered round the preacher who told the audience how God made Adam and put him up on the fence to dry. Someone interrupted him and doubted as to how the fence could come before Adam - “Oh! Such doubts will smash all theology,” cried the startled preacher! Occasionally when some question about his adjusting to American circumstances arose, Vivekananda would burst out laughing, “Me Melican man now.” Pressed to trace the origin of the funny phrase he would relate the story of the Chinese who, being accused of stealing pork, and hearing the remark of the judge that he believed the Chinese did not eat pork, gaily told him “Me Malican now.”

The accounts that he particularly liked were repeated on different occasions with the narration slightly altered to suit the person or the audience the story was meant for. In his writings were found over four hundreded stories of varying lengths. Some span only couple of lines while others cover
several pages. They are stories closely related to the Indian heartland and the human nature - about greats kings and sages of India and about gods and godesses of Hindu religions, these tales are upholder of Indian social heritage.

His enthusiasm for stories as an effective tool to teach people and his own wish to write stories can be discerned from his letter to Dr. Nanjunda Rao sent on April 14, 1896 from New York. The letter discusses his idea of the kind of material that should be published in Brahmavadin – the Mission’s magazine. He writes:

“There is a great chance ... for those wonderful stories scattered all over the sanskrit literature, to be re-written and made popular ... I will write stories, as many as I can, when time permits ... Use the simplest language possible, and you will succeed. The main feature should be the teaching of the principles through stories. Don’t make it metaphysical at all.”


This is basically the fundamental percept behind all his stories.
4.2

INFLUENCE OF THE EPICS ON VIVEKAKANANDA’S PROSE

Introduced to the epics and religious stories by his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, as a child Vivekananda enjoyed the stories of courage, cowardice, compassion, jealousy, hatred, love and myriad such emotions that ail as well as enrich human life, all woven together in the retelling of an epic battles of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. As he grew older and under the tutelage of Sri Ramakrishna became the *Yogi* the world would later know him as, these very stories ceased to be just a play of characters and settings. During one of his lectures to the Western audience in America, Swami Vivekananda had remarked:

“*this Kurukshetra War is only an allegory. When we sum up its esoteric significance, it means the war which is constantly going on within man between the tendencies of good and evil.*” (Vivekananda. 2006: 4: 105).

Vivekananda believed that the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the two encyclopedias of the ancient Aryan life and wisdom portraying an ideal civilization which humanity has yet to aspire after. For Vivekananda the epics, and in particular *Mahabharata* which includes the Bhagwat Gita,
were the quintessence of the wisdom of Hindu wisdom and knowledge. In an American newspaper report, Vivekananda, referred to as “the Great Monk of India”, was quoted thus on the importance of the Indian epics:

“As Western scholars devote their whole life to one Greek work, let them likewise devote their whole life to one Sanskrit work, and much light will flow to the world thereby. The Mahabharata especially is the most invaluable work in Indian history; and it is not too much to say that this book has not as yet been even properly read by the Westerners.”


The Mahabharata is given utmost importance as a source of Vedanta philosophy. It contains all the essential teachings of the Vedanta philosophy and helps to understand the purport of the Vedas and the Upanishads. As the Sanskrit shloka goes itihasapurananabhyaam vedam samupabrahamayeth, meaning that while the Vedas and the Upanishads teach the theory of Vedanta, the Mahabharata teaches the practice through appropriate illustrations. The Mahabharata works as the source and as an aid to the exposition of the Vedanta philosophy. Swami Vivekananda understood this and held the epic in very high regard. The Bhagwat Gita is
the most important part of the *Mahabharata* and is a seven hundred verses long conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefields of Kurukshetra. The *Bhagwat Gita* was the cornerstone of Swami Vivekananda’s teachings and was often referenced to and recounted for the readers in his writings. On several occasions he interspersed his essays with couplets from the *Bhagwat* to elucidate his argument and used stories from the epic to explain a difficult treatise. The *Bhagwat Gita* is an interminable text that has stood the test of time, and which Vivekananda labels “the good, the pure, the true.” The *Mahabharata* and the Ramayana are a spectacular example of a complex storyline weaving within itself countless characters yet never losing the plot, and at the same time delivering one of the grandest theories on human life ever known to mankind in the form of the *Bhagwat Gita*. They are the perfect amalgamation of philosophy and fiction. A string of busy episodes playing up human acts and emotions become vacant reflections in the face of the pragmatic smile of Sri Krishna who declares them nothing but a chain of actions and consequences. The epic story of the sons and grandsons of King Bharat is summarised as the endless cycle of *karma* and *bhog*, nothing more and nothing less, and in the view of Sri Krishna’s wise words, the entire tale become a metaphor for human life on earth. In the stories of
the Ramayana people find the embodiments of the ideal: Rama the ideal man; Sita the ideal woman; and Hanuman the ideal bhakta.

As a storyteller Swami Vivekananda rewrote and paraphrased incidents and stories from the text of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. While retelling the Ramayana Vivekananda noted that there is no other story from the Puranas that has permeated the race of the whole nation in such a manner as the ideal of Sita. He said that in the quiet suffering of Sita is the strength of India where people have the power to face dire hardships with calm and wisdom. He wrote about the might and absolute devotion of Hanuman and the interesting story of Valmiki, the poet sage who composed the Ramayana. He rephrased the Vyadha Gita which means teachings of a butcher. Vyadha Gita is a part of the Mahabharata and consists of the teachings imparted by a vyadha or a butcher to a brahmin sannyasin or a monk. It occurs in the Vana Parva section of Mahabharata and is told to Yudhishtira by sage Markandeya. Similarly the story of Savitri, or several episodes related to Sri Krishna found reinterpretations in Swami Vivekananda’s words. His story The Story of the Boy Gopala although a fiction, relates to the divine aspect of Sri Krishna very similar to the way it is portrayed in the epic. So influenced was he by the story of Mahabharata that he recounted the entire length of it to his audience at the
Shakespeare Club in Pasadena, California one cold February morning in 1900. He was convinced that *Mahabharata* held the all the life’s lessons. The point he made at conclusion is worth a note:

“In speaking of the *Mahabharata* to you, it is simply impossible for me to present the unending array of the grand and majestic characters of the mighty heroes depicted by the genius and master-mind of Vyasa. The internal conflicts between righteousness and filial affection in the mind of the god-fearing, yet feeble, old, blind King Dhritarashtra; the majestic character of the grandsire Bhishma; the noble and virtuous nature of the royal Yudhishtira, and of the other four brothers, as mighty in valour as in devotion and loyalty; the peerless character of Krishna, unsurpassed in human wisdom; and not less brilliant, the characters of the women - the stately queen Gandhari, the loving mother Kunti, the ever-devoted and all-suffering Draupadi - these and hundreds of other characters of this Epic and those of the *Ramayana* have been the cherished heritage of the whole Hindu world for the last several thousands of years and form the basis of their thoughts and of their moral and
ethical ideas. In fact, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two encyclopedias of the ancient Aryan life and wisdom, portraying an ideal civilisation which humanity has yet to aspire after.”


In the essays and articles he wrote for various papers and magazines too Sanskrit quotes from the epics are interwoven in the explication. Is the Soul Immortal?, Reincarnation, The Land of Religion, Reply to the Madras Address etc. all heavily quote the Hindu scriptures predominantly the Bhagwat Gita. His piece of writing titled The Absolute and the Attainment of Freedom is an elaboration on the nature of the Absolute, the Param Brahma, or the Sat Chida Nanda as found in the pages of the Bhagwat.

4.3

WRITING STYLE

In Is the Soul Immortal?, published in the pages of The New York Morning Advisor, Vivekananda starts off by quoting the Bhagwat Gita (“None has power to destroy the unchangeable”), and forms his exposition
around a conversation between two of the characters of the *Mahabharata* viz. Yuddhishtir and Dharma. He writes:

“In the great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*, the story is told how the hero, Yudhishthira, when asked by Dharma to tell what was the most wonderful thing in the world, replied, that it was the persistent belief of mankind in their own deathlessness in spite of their witnessing death everywhere around them almost every moment of their lives. And, in fact, this is the most stupendous wonder in human life. In spite of all arguments to the contrary urged in different times by different schools, in spite of the inability of reason to penetrate the veil of mystery which will ever hang between the sensuous and the supersensuous worlds, man is thoroughly persuaded that he cannot die.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 4: 253).

This is a powerful opening for a subsequent argument attempting to breakdown a question with two immeasurable and subjective values – ‘soul’ and ‘immortality’. The reference to a well established philosophical treatise of *Bhagwat Gita* gives Vivekananda’s essay a touch of historical
credibility; and his own precise statement on the existential absurdity of human life reveals his intellect.

His essay *Reincarnation* starts similarly with a quote from the *Bhagwat Gita* ("Both you and I have passed through many births; you know them not, I know them all.") After which he writes:

“Of the many riddles that have perplexed the intellect of man in all climes and times, the most intricate is himself. Of the myriad mysteries that have called forth his energies to struggle for solution from the very dawn of history, the most mysterious is his own nature. It is at once the most insoluble enigma and the problem of all problems. As the starting-point and the repository of all we know and feel and do, there never has been, nor will be, a time when man's own nature will cease to demand his best and foremost attention.”


The reference to that exact quote from the *Bhagwat Gita* serves to highlight his own point of view or his own philosophy regarding the subject of *Reincarnation* while the opening paragraph notes beautifully
how man’s own existence and the nature or the purpose of his being will always remain a perplexing yet pertinent question, and so the discussion on the theory of reincarnation, deeply associated with “man’s own nature” will always remain a relevant one.

Vivekananda wastes no time, or words, in order to come to his point. Like the epic opening of his poems snapping a reader into attention,

(“Behold, it comes in might,
The power that is not power,
The light that is in darkness,
The shade in dazzling light.”
(Vivekananda. 2007: 29)

Vivekananda opens his essay with full intention to summon all of the reader’s attention and engage him intellectually with his ideas. His method is never to confuse the reader with his philosophical expositions, rather he takes the reader with him as he defragments the topic into smaller modules assigning each argument a well thought out paragraphs leading to a very logical and summarising conclusion.
There is an artlessness to the writings of Vivekananda. He had once said that all his speeches were extempore; his written words too show an impulsive style. R. A. Malagi rightly pointed out in his essay *Stirred Spirit: The Prose of Swami Vivekananda* that the prose of Vivekananda have a spontaneous form unfettered by logicality on one hand and verbal artifice on the other. They are not composed like Sri Aurobindo’s in the depths of meditative solitude; they flowed through him in a life of hectic activity and ceaseless movement.

Vivekananda’s scholarship can be seen in his writing and he fills his essays with exhaustive details. In a single essay *Reincarnation* Vivekananda mentions studies by Karl Heckel, Herodotus, A. Erman (an eminent Egyptologist), I. H. Fishte, Arthur Schopenhauer, David Hume, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; tracts from *Rig Veda Samhita*, the *Bhagwat Gita*, the *Bible*; and facts pertaining the concept and understanding of body and soul in races ancient and new, from all over the world – from the Aryan, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist to Pharisees, Persians and Egyptian or Chaldeans. This array of information gives a universal and comparative perspective to Vivekananda’s essay while also establishing Vivekananda’s scholarship. It should be noted how Vivekananda uses ideologies from
both ancient as well as contemporary sources and manages to find a fine balance between the two.

A poet in heart, his prose does not escape his natural tendency towards poetics and his serious writing flourishes in lyrical expressions such as this in Reincarnation: “The west is a land of sleep and of heavy shadows.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 4: 261).

His essays though prosaic have phrases and sentences which display his distinctive sense of rhythm in writing, and his use of language devices ascribe a flow to the reading of his prose.

Always one to appreciate good poetry, he includes ones of his choice in his prose. In one such case he attributes poignant lines from a Sanskrit poem to Max Muller to conclude a moving account of On Professor Max Muller:

“‘When are you coming to India? Every heart there would welcome one who has done so much to place the thoughts of their ancestors in the true light,’ I said. The face of the aged sage brightened up - there was almost a tear in his eyes, a gentle nodding of the head, and slowly the words came out: ‘I would not return then; you would
have to cremate me there.’ Further questions seemed an unwarrantable intrusion into realms wherein are stored the holy secrets of man’s heart. Who knows but that it was what the poet has said -

तच्चेतसा समरतं नूनमबोधपुरवं।
भावसूधरिणज्ञनानवतरसीहवानि॥

- ‘He remembers with his mind the friendships of former births, firmly rooted in his heart.’”


Vivekananda’s message was universal brotherhood and the intrinsic divinity of man. His essays are an elaboration of his belief that all men all over the world were equal; that there is only one power and the different religions are only different paths to it, and that all men who aspire to divinity, could. In a poetical expression of his understanding that in this creation all mean all over the world are made the same, he writes:

“Many wonderful institutions and customs, and many wonderful manifestations of strength and power it has been my good fortune to study in the midst of the various races I have seen, but the most wonderful of all was to find that beneath all these apparent variations of
manners and customs, of culture and power, beats the same mighty human heart under the impulsion of the same joys and sorrows, of the same weakness and strength. Good and evil are everywhere and the balance is wondrously even; but, above all, is the glorious soul of man everywhere which never fails to understand any one who knows how to speak its own language. Men and women are to be found in every race whose lives are blessings to humanity, verifying the words of the divine Emperor Asoka: ‘In every land dwell Brahmins and Shramanas.’” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 312)

The power of his expression is further elucidated in the following lines from Sketch of the Life of Pavhari Baba:

“Facts, naked facts, gaunt and terrible may be; truth, bare truth, though its vibrations may snap every chord of the heart; motive selfless and sincere, though to reach it, limb after limb has to be lopped off — such are to be arrived at, found, and gained, before the mind on the lower plane of activity can raise huge work-waves. The fine accumulates round itself the gross as it rolls on
This particular write-up is also interesting because although the title denotes it to be an account of the life of Pavhari Baba, a good part of it is an account of journey of a man from ignorance to knowledge, from a human to seer. And by writing this piece in such a manner Vivekananda has, in fact, captured the very essence of his subject – Pavhari Baba was a Hindu ascetic who had renounced the world, and had built an underground hermitage. For a person who had transgressed the desire for living in the society and dedicated his life to the attainment of knowledge through hard penance and meditation, this style of biographical account by Vivekananda seems as fitting as any.

Inspite of the creative language employed by Vivekananda, what strikes through his essays and other writings is his strong sense of logic. Even while dealing with lofty questions of religion and God he disapproves of any statement that cannot be backed with sound reasoning and raison d’être, as is seen in the following example:
“In the first place, God being the universal and common cause of all phenomena, the question was to find the natural causes of certain phenomena in the human soul, and the Deus ex machina theory is, therefore, quite irrelevant. It amounts to nothing less than confession of ignorance. We can give that answer to every question asked in every branch of human knowledge and stop all inquiry and, therefore, knowledge altogether.

Secondly, this constant appeal to the omnipotence of God is only a word-puzzle. The cause, as cause, is and can only be known to us as sufficient for the effect, and nothing more. As such we have no more idea of an infinite effect than of an omnipotent cause. Moreover, all our ideas of God are only limited; even the idea of cause limits our idea of God. Thirdly, even taking the position for granted, we are not bound to allow any such absurd theories as "Something coming out of nothing", or "Infinity beginning in time", so long as we can give a better explanation.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 4: 268-269).
His own insistence on reason, facts and logic is perhaps what propels him to take painstaking measures to back his statements with points from varied sources thus making his writing an elaborate and multi-layered endeavour. He interjects his writing with questions that he feels that his reader will ask after having read a certain length of his writing. Then he goes on to answer these questions. His mindfulness of his audience shows the intimate nature of his communication. He constantly engages his reader lest the theoretical aspect of his writing leave the reader alienated and at bay. Yet at no point is the reader forced to agree with his view. Vivekananda seems to only want to present all points of view, including his own, and urge the reader’s intellect to make an informed choice.

4.4

LANGUAGE DEVICES

Discussing his own idea of language Vivekananda had said,

“Simplicity is the secret. My ideal of language is my Master’s language, most colloquial and yet most expressive. It must express the thought which is intended to be conveyed.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 5: 259).
He stressed on judging the style of language on the basis of whether it was able to convey a message effectively to the target audience. Bernard Shaw also believed that “effectiveness of assertion is the alpha and omega of style” (Shaw. 2000: xxxvii). He shares this qualities with the writings of John Dryden, Bernard Shaw and Hemmingway.

It must be noted here that though Vivekananda did prefer simple and elucidatory approach, in a comparision of his essays and his stories his writing style shows a remarkable difference in the choice of words and form. In his essays his sentences formation is complex and he uses the full extent of his vocabulary and linguistic skills. Whereas the stories have simpler style. The difference could be attributed to the differnece in the purpose behind each of the writings. The essays were expositions and extentions of his scholarly lectures and his true to his form as a writer. The stories on the other hand were told as an inspiration from and in the tradition of katha in India where religious and tradional parables containing morals are retold for the benefit of the listeners. Vivekananda on his part recounted the tales in simple words for the benefit of his Indian, American and English students and followers.
Vivekananda freely borrows phrases and quotations from different languages. He refers to a quote from Schopenhauer’s book Die Welt als Willie und Vorstellung which is in German; Latin phrases like “Deus ex machina” and “Sine qua non”; Sanskrit shlokas like “मद्भक्तानां च ये भक्तास्ते मे भक्ततमा मता:” and “तमैवैकं जानथ जात्मानमन्या वाघो विमुञ्च्यथ” in Bengali; Hindi and French. This adds colour to his narrative and imparts dimension to his analogies.

Vivekananda’s voice can be imperative too: “Feel like Christ and you will be a Christ; feel like Buddha and you will be a Buddha” (Vivekananda: 2007: 2: 307) or, “Control the mind, cut off the senses, then you are a Yogi; after that, all the rest will come. Refuse to hear, to see, to smell, to taste; take away the mental power from the external organs” (Vivekananda: 2005: 7: 71). This sense of authority in his tone can be attributed to the confidence of his own wisdom and knowledge of the Vedanta.

There is a boldness to Vivekananda’s character and voice that is reflected in his language also. His passion for his work reeks into his language and it becomes increasingly indignant when he talks about a subject close to his heart:
“So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 5: 58).

And,

“They ask us for bread, but we give them stones. It is an insult to a starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics.”

(Vivekananda. 2007: 1: 20).

Vivekananda was a fiery nationalist who loved his country deeply yet could give unbiased judgement of the maladies that ailed its society and culture. He always urged the Indians to stand up against supression. About those who were faint hearted and did not promote encouragement to youth to rise against the British, he once said:

“If one of our countrymen stands up and tries to become great, we all try to hold him down, but if a foreigner comes and tries to kick us, it is all right.”

(Vivekananda. 2007: 3: 300).
The dynamism of Vivekananda’s writings manifests in his repetition of certain word or phrases. In a lengthy message to his countrymen Vivekananda had written about the heritage of India and its importance in the world. “Shall India die? Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 348). This message intended to inspire pride and embolden the young men of India to work towards making their nation stronger and better. His writing emphasised this theme by his repeated use of the phrase “will be extinct”.

There are instances of paradoxes in Vivekananda’s writing that are witty and clever: “Liberation means entire freedom - freedom from the bondage of good, as well as from the bondage of evil. A golden chain is as much a chain as an iron one” (Vivekananda. 2007: 1: 55); “To be religious, you have first to throw (religious) books overboard” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 34); “But, in my opinion (religious) books have produced more evil than good. They are accountable for many mischievous doctrines” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 44).
Vivekananda was known to use terms of references that his audience could relate to. The use of analogy complimented his style. A good analogy is the one that shows a close similarity between the major and the minor terms of reference. Vivekananda displays a clever sense of choice as far as his two references are concerned. Explaining his concept of art he had said, “Now, true Art can be compared to a lily which springs from the ground, takes its nourishment from the ground, is in touch with the ground, and yet is quite high above it.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 5: 258).

From his deep understanding of the human nature, he found parallels between a man stuck in this materialistic world and a bee stuck to a honey-pot, both unable to free themselves from something that is their object of desire as well as the cause of their anguish:

“The bee came to sip the honey, but its feet stuck to the honey-pot and it could not get away. Again and again, we are finding ourselves in that state. That is the whole secret of existence. Why are we here? We came here to sip the honey, and we find our hands and feet sticking to it. We are caught, though we came to catch. We came to enjoy; we are being enjoyed. We came to rule; we are being ruled.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 2: 2).
Aptly defining India’s mammoth fall from glory and prosperity to poverty and wounded pride under the foreign rule, Vivekananda had said on January 27, 1900 in America: “It is like a gigantic building all tumbled down in ruins.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 8: 73). This analogy of a gigantic building tumbled and resting on its vestiges served well to describe India at that point of history. But he also warned against futile show of despair and favoured pro-action to solve one’s problems:

“If this room is full of darkness for thousands of years and you come in and begin to weep and wail, ‘Oh the darkness’, will the darkness vanish? Strike a match and light comes in a moment.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 2: 357).

Vivekananda also employs similes to explain his ideas better. On the powers and the expanse of the human mind he said:

“Like fire in a piece of flint, knowledge exists in the mind; suggestion is the friction which brings it out. So with all all our feelings and actions – our tears and our smiles, our joys and our griefs, our weeping and our laughter, our curses and our blessings, our praises and our blames – every one of these we may find, if we calmly study our
own selves, to have been brought out from within
ourselves by so many blows.”


In another example of a simile, Vivekananda likened the aspirations of
man to a spring: “Man is like an infinite spring, coiled up in a small box,
and that spring is trying to unfold itself; and all the social phenomenon
that we see the result of this trying to unfold.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 1: 389).

On the balance of good and evil in the universe Vivekananda said: “It is
like old rheumatism: Drive it from one place, it goes to another.”

As in poetry, Vivekananda could furnish apt metaphors in prose as well.
Even his speeches were enlivened by interesting conceits. His metaphors
are novel and expressive. A notable metaphor from his famous Chicago
address likened the plight of man to the condition of a weak little boat
captured in the midst of a tempest and an angry sea:

“Is man a tiny boat in a tempest, raised one moment on
the foamy crest of a billow and dashed down into a
yawning chasm the next, rolling to and fro at the mercy
of good and bad actions – a powerless, helpless wreck in
an ever – raging, ever rushing, uncompromising current
of cause and effect; a little moth placed under the wheel
of causation which rolls on crushing everything in its
way and waits not for the widow’s tears or the orphan’s
cry.” (Vivekananda 2007: 1: 10).

Here while the boat represents the man, the sea is life and the world is full
of unexpected trials and tribulations testing the mettle of the man at every
step. The tempest, the violent cause of the crest and trough in the sea is the
result of a man’s own good and bad past actions. He wonders if a man
thrown about in life, subjected to the results of his own karma is entirely
helpless under the wheels that have been set rolling ages ago spurred by a
certain act. Like a moth caught under an inexorable wheel. It is a very
visual metaphor. He continues this metaphor later when he says: “What are
we but floating wavelets in the eternal current of events, irresistibly moved
forward and onward and incapable of rest?” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 139).

At the same time, in a stark contrast to this weak image of a man as a tiny
boat and a moth, in another metaphor he says that every soul is like a
young eagle soaring higher and higher gathering more and more strength
till it reaches the “Glorious Sun”. With this metaphor he attributes the soul an eagle’s strength and its great flight.

A persistent propagator for the rights of the women and the importance of granting equal status to women in a society, Vivekananda had said: “The best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of its women.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 8: 198).

In his prose there can also be found examples of antithesis and balance:

“Gifts of political knowledge can be made with the blast of trumpets and the march of cohorts. Gifts of secular knowledge and social knowledge can be made with fire and sword. But spiritual knowledge can only be given in silence like the dew that falls unseen and unheard, yet bringing into bloom masses of roses.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 3: 222).

Other examples are: “The lower the organism, the greater is its pleasure in the senses. ... The higher the organism, the lesser is the pleasure of the senses.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 242) and “It is better to die seeking a God than as a dog seeking only carrion.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 7: 45).
Vivekananda’s prose work is full of epigrams, which again flatters his style of impactful and concise speech and writing. Many of these have become mottos and are often quoted by people in their own writing and speeches. These epigrams range from the subject of religion and life to that of social issues. Of many examples few are the following: “Religion is a constitutional necessity of the human mind.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 1: 318); “A (sacred) book is the most tangible form of God.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 44); “The message makes the messenger. The Lord makes the temple; not vice versa.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 7: 65); “What is the future but the present illimitable?” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 215); “Great convictions are the mothers of great deeds.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 5: 30). Vivekananda writing a message to the youth of India to forgo luxury in order to join forces and work for their nation wrote emphatically: “No great work can be done without sacrifice.” (Vivekananda. 2005: 4: 352)

People who met Vivekananda noted his use of epigrams. Sister Nivedita has written that his talks teemed epigrams and giving an example quoted him: “In order to become a nation, it appears that we need a common hate as well as a common love.” (Vivekananda. 2006: 9: 338). In the March 1923 issue of Prabuddha Bharat Reeves Calkins, an American missionary, wrote about his first meeting and following interactions with Vivekananda
during a voyage in 1900 from Naples to Mumbai, which was then known as Bombay, on the ship *Rubattino* of an old Italian Line. Calkins had heard of Vivekananda’s erstwhile success at the Parliament of Religions, which was held at Chicago. Vivekananda was one of the very few Indian on board and his distinctive personality and authoritative presence attracted the attention of several fellow American and European passengers. One or the other of these passengers proceeded to “draw” Vivekananda, as Calkins observed, but Vivekananda refused to be drawn. His answers were sufficient and brilliant; and according to Calkin sparkled with epigrams and apt quotations thus disarming those with lesser wit. What followed next were several friendly meals and uninterrupted forum of interesting discussions.

4.5

**HUMOUR AND SATIRE**

He displays easy humor in his writings. He was a man of sharp wit and could be ironical and satirical, as he wished. This gives his writing an edge and a personality. While talking about Max Muller he offers light satire on the tradition of scholastics and writes:
“Think of this man without any help, poring over old manuscripts, hardly legible to the Hindus themselves, and in a language to acquire which takes a lifetime even in India - without even the help of any needy Pandit whose ‘brains could be picked’, as the Americans say, for ten shillings a month, and a mere mention of his name in the introduction to some book of ‘very new researches’”


Noting that people want results as soon as they start working towards a goal he said sarcastically referring to the exemplary devotee Hanuman who had been blessed with great powers: “Before we can crawl half a mile, we want to cross the ocean like Hanuman!” (Vivekananda. 2007: 3: 301). His another statement serves as an example of irony: “Well, has it been said that the masses admire the lion that kills a thousand lambs, never for a moment thinking that it is death to the lambs.” (Vivekananda. 2007: 2: 65).

His humour and penchant for satire is notable in his stories where the clever use of his wit enlivens the prose. He was especially critical of the organised religions and the _pundits_ and the clergies who had turned spirituality into a business of fooling the masses. Writing from New York
on June 22, 1895, Vivekananda wrote a story to Mary Hale explaining the crux of his criticism, albeit in a lighter tone:

“An American vessel was being foundered in the sea; the men were desperate and as a last solace wanted some religious service being done. There was ‘Uncle Josh’ on board who was an elder in the Presbyterian Church. They all began to entreat, ‘Do something religious, Uncle Josh! We are all going to die.’ Uncle Joseph took his hat in his hand and took up a collection on the spot! That is all of religion he knew.”

(Vivekananda. 2006: 8: 342)

In another instance of his criticism on the same subject he wrote ironically:

“And in [spirituality’s] place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force, and competition its ceremonies, and the human soul its sacrifice.”

4.6

STORIES

Vivekananda was first introduced to Indian fables and stories by his mother who would recount for her son, especially from the great epics, tales about kings and knaves, gods and sages, evil and virtues and countless such themes. This was, like in the case of so many other Indian children, his initiation into India’s own tradition and style of storytelling. These stories clearly had a great impact on him because hidden within the folds of Vivekananda’s complete works is a repertoire of stories.

Vivekananda included stories in a seamless continuation to his otherwise mostly philosophical writings. His personal letters with an advice, for example, would incorporate a short story that supported or elaborated the point he was making. He told stories to involve his audience and pique their interest. He knew that an entertaining story was far better device to engage and teach people. Hence, he always made a point to relate one to liven up an otherwise difficult and overwhelming treatise of Vedanta. The stories made the dire philosophies relatable for a common man. Vivekananda could abbreviate and explain the concepts like *maya, mukti, bhakti* etc. The French opera singer Emma Calve wrote in her biography
My Life, that she could not understand Vivekananda’s insistence that the purpose of the soul is to become one with the Absolute and she was repulsed by the thought of the loss of her ego or the individuality. When she wrote him about her bewilderment, Vivekananda wrote her the following story:

“One day a drop of water fell into the vast ocean. When it found itself there, it began to weep and complain. The great ocean laughed at the drop of water. ‘Why do you weep?’ it asked, ‘I do not understand. When you join me, you join all your brothers and sisters, the other drops of water of which I am made. You become the ocean itself. If you wish to leave me, you have only to rise up on a sunbeam into the clouds. From there you can descend again, little drop of water, a blessing and a benediction to the thirsty earth.’” (Calve. 1922: 186)

Through a simple story Vivekananda could explain to Emma Calve the relationship between the Absolute and the soul.

All the stories by Vivekananda have a moral message. They are parables on legendary Indian figures and extol the traditional Indian virtues. Like
the stories told in the Indian families by the elders to the young, these stories too were narrated in the same manner. Vivekananda retold stories from the Upanishads, the Epics, Indian history and folklores in his own words. Usually dealing with a historical or religious theme or character, they all taught a lesson on human life and living. The protagonists in his stories were brave men and women who were not afraid to stand up for their rights and their honour. Given his wit and predilection for satire he used the stories to criticize the social mal-practices, superstitions, prejudices and the pandits, the clergies and the maulvis of the organized religions who were not sincere in their job.

There are several stories in his works about the historical figures of India that he greatly admired. Vivekananda was himself a strong leader and a man of action and he had great admiration for historical figures who had shown strength in difficult times. He wrote about Vidyasagar, a personality who, according to Sister Nivedita, he regarded with deep respect. He wrote about the story how King Ashoka was first introduced to Buddhism; about the King of Mewar Pratap Singh who fought against Akbar; the love story of Prithvi Raja and Samjukta; about the brave Rajput Queen of Chitore, Rani Padmaja who performed sati with 74,500 other women when Chitore was invaded by the Muslim empire.
He condensed the entire *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into smaller modules and retold them highlighting the important events in the epics concerning Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Krishna, and the Pandavas. He also told traditional stories about Hindu gods and goddesses like those about the devoted Prahlad’s and his King father Hiranyakashyup who did not believe in God; Naachiketa’s lesson from Yama about afterlife; Ghantakaran, the foolish man who believed one form of God to be greater than the other; and when Indra, the King of Gods, was born on earth as a pig and believed himself to be one because of the spin of *Maya*. He told several stories connected to the saints and religious figures like Buddha, Guru Nanak, Jesus, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, and Pavhari Baba. To him these were the ideals of human devotion and perseverance for search of God and he wrote stories about them to his followers so they may take them as an example to emulate in their own lives.

Vivekananda had a sharp perception of the human nature and its propensity towards the fallible. He enumerated these tendencies into the characters of the stories he made to warn his students and followers. On the superstitions harboured by many and to teach people that a man makes his own destiny, he related an interesting story about a king who was told by an astrologer...
that he would die within six months. The frightened King was consoled by his wise minister that it was foolish to believe such a prediction, but the King’s worry could not be assuaged. The minister decided to invite the astrologer again to the court. He asked the astrologer to recalculate and repeat his prediction about the King. The astrologer did so and said that the King indeed was to die in six months. The King was livid. The minister then asked the astrologer when the astrologer himself was to die and he replied that he was to die in twelve years. The minister immediately took out his sword and chopped off the astrologer’s head and said to the King, “Do you see this liar? He is dead this moment.” Similarly, there are other stories like the *Chess Players of Bombay, The Man and the Ghost, The English Guest, The Stag* etc., which take the characters of simple men and women and even birds and animals and tell tales of great wisdom.

Vivekananda told these stories to his Eastern as well as the Western disciples. For his disciples from America and Europe, these tales served as their window into the cultural and social history of India. It gave them an idea of the backdrop of Hindu religion. It was Vivekananda’s stories which inspired Sister Nivedita to write the book *Cradle Tales of Hinduism.*
Vivekananda displays a finesse in the art of story telling. He has an absolute command over his language, he knows his subject matter extremely well and he understands his audience even better. He combines these three features to write stories that have balanced form, are educative as well as entertaining and make for a delightful read. He writes his stories in simple and colloquial language. He does not adorn them with elaborate imagery or complex analogies because he wants them to be understood by each and every man. He keeps his stories free of linguistic frills and lets the message of the tale take the center-stage. Like in his essays he prefers to come directly to the point. His stories are usually pithy and deal with two or three central character. He interjects the stories with his own comments which are witty and informative. His voice is personal and the narrative feels as if he is telling the story in person. This intimate nature of his story telling, and the themes thereof, is what incites reference to the culture of story telling in India, where in old times the only form of entertainment for people in the evening when they got free from all their work, was to sit around in groups with some food and drinks and tell each other folk tales and stories which were usually about religious figures and had a moral lesson. In the households, the mothers or the grand-parents would tell their children the stories in order to instill values in them and teach them about good and evil. Vivekananda does the same through his
stories today, in a time when the traditional form of storytelling is slowly disappearing from the Indian culture and society.
Chapter 4

4.7

REFERENCES


