



## **NARENDRA NATH DUTTA : A YOUTH IN SEARCH OF GOD**

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We are experiencing a paradigm shift happened in Indian national political scenario since last year, which is optimistically projecting youth as an effective transformation force for an overall change in national life. Keeping this background in mind, Swami Vivekananda is an obvious choice of being an icon for youth as well as a source of inspiration, irrespective of cast, class, culture or religion. Usually discussions on Vivekananda moves around his were being ardent speaker on Vedanta at America, or as an icon for new generation. It is interesting to analyze the images or pictures emerge in one's mind, when talking about Swami Vivekananda as a youth icon.

If I correctly recall one such popular posture of Swami Vivekananda, it is depicting him standing firmly with determination, sometimes with tightly cross hands at the chest and sometimes open handed at kanayakumari, where the three oceans of Indian peninsula i.e. Indian Ocean, Arab Sea and Bay of Bengal met together, To his left, Vivekananda Rock and its Memorial shown at a distance in the background, which was interestingly erected in 1970 after a nationwide movement led by Eknath and inaugurated by the President of India Shri V.V. Giri on 2nd September, 1970, to commemorate the awakening of Vivekananda happened during Christmas week in 1892 and his self realization for the cause of humanity. Adorned with a typically draped turban on head and covered from neck to toe in saffron robe, wearing old fashioned wooden sleeper, looking towards his right side or towards west with a far sighted vision, a visible firmness on face and delighted youthfulness and glow all round, which is categorically associated with the one who attained the higher stage of Gyana.

If we carefully analyze this picture, we can identify few important symbols i.e. a saffron dress though typically associated to sannyasin yet the style is distinct to Swami Vivekananda, (which later on become the distinct style of the monistic order of Ramakrishna Math and Mission) sight of

Kanyakumari with Vivekananda Rock and Monument in the background. All these symbolize the turning point when “The simple monk was transformed into a great reformer, a great organizer, and a great nation builder”<sup>1</sup>. This photographic description helps us to understand how we create iconic pictures of great personalities, popular and widely accepted, easily identifiable among masses, while highlighting the turning point of their life or any great event associated with them.

Despite a range of photographs of swami Vivekananda available, we still prefer using an artistic expression of Swami Vivekananda, though the depiction is no doubt imaginative, but still dominate the collective memory. Seldom have we used photographs of swamiji, shoot with camera. “Vivekananda : A Biography in Pictures”, published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, first in 1966 than in 1973 and 2005 respectively, with additions and changes of many new photographs shot between 1884 to 1901.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, biography does not offer childhood or teenage photographs of Narendranath Dutta or his little siblings and his father Vishwanath Dutta, but provide photograph of his mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi, maternal grandmother Raghmani Devi, brother Mahendranath and Bhupendranath and sister Swarnamayee Devi, but all are of a later date.<sup>4</sup>

Oldest picture of Narendranath Dutta are of 1885-86, prior to the Mahasamadhi of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa in August 1886. Though the vow to renunciation (Sannyasa) was taken by Narendranath Dutta and his brother disciples on the Christmas Eve of 1886, and by January 1887, he first started using sannyasa name Vividishananda and later adopted another name Vivekananda<sup>5</sup>.

This analysis helps us to understand reasons behind selection of only monistic images of Narendranath Dutta. It leads us to two conclusions. First, pictures of Narendranath Dutta prior to 1885-86, were either hardly shoot or rare to get or lost forever. Thus, we are left with only descriptive images of Narendara Nath Dutt and his early photographs as sadhaka under the mentorship of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.<sup>6</sup> Hence, in absence of older pictures, monistic images were the only option left to use and circulate.

It resulted into Vivekananda’s over shadowing the personality of Narendranath Dutta especially in print and drastically in memory. And for this very reason we hardly consider Narendranath Dutta as an icon for youth. Although it was Narendranath Dutta who was chosen by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, as his most beloved disciple, to be evolved into Vivekananda later, and criteria was simply his intrinsic and extrinsic qualities, a rarity in the college students of those days of Calcutta, as asserted by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Advaita Ashrama (2007) : “Vivekananda : A Biography in Pictures”, Kolkata, India, Page-37

<sup>2</sup> Swami Gambhiranand, Yug Nayak Swami Vivekanand, Volume-1, Ram Krishna Math, Nagpur, Page-148

Today we project Vivekananda as a youth icon and his thoughts and ideas as great source of inspiration for mankind, but at the same time we must remember that it was Narendranath Dutta who under the guidance of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa transformed into a Sadhak and after his Mahasamadhi lead the whole school of brother-disciple and other new entrants with care and affection. Evolving into Vivekananda was a long and constant process, Narendra went through which since long.

Vivekananda was the one having all the answers; on the contrary Narendra was the one struggling to get answers of his questions throughout. His training at home, interaction with different people, socialization, rational thinking and various other personality traits were his strong assets for his being chosen by Sri Ramakrishna for executing the divine plan<sup>3</sup>.

Narendra was resulted out of his great ancestors. His Grandfather Durgacharan Dutta renounced the worldly life merely at the age of 25. His father Vishwanath Datta, an attorney of Calcutta High Court, was considered a generous and kind hearted towards poor, and had a progressive outlook in social and religious matters due to the influence of western culture. He was proficient in English and Persian and was well acquaint with Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit, as well as Holy Bible and poems of Persian poet Hafiz. Both these personalities influenced him unconsciously during childhood.

“I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge”, these were the words of Swami Vivekananda in gratitude of his mother, a deeply religious and morally high lady. Narendranath's mother played a very important role in his spiritual development. One of the saying of his mother, Narendra quoted often in his later years was, “Remain pure all your life; guard your own honor and never transgress the honor of others. Be very tranquil, but when necessary, harden your heart.”, We reasonably understand that thinking and personality of Naren was initially influenced by his parents-the father by his rational mind and the mother by her religious temperament.

Narendranath started his early education at home and later at the age of 8, admitted to Metropolitan Institution (now Vidyasagar College) of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in 1871 and passed the Entrance Examination in 1879. Narendranath entered the first year Arts class of Presidency College, Calcutta in January 1880 at the age of 17, but next year he shifted to General Assembly Institution (now Scottish Church College, Calcutta). During the course, he studied western logic, western philosophy and history of European nations. In 1881 he passed the Fine Arts examination and in 1884 he passed the Bachelor of Arts. Lastly he took admission in Metropolitan Institution to study law, but could not complete.

According to his professors, student Narendranath was a prodigy. Dr. William Hastie, the principal of Scottish Church College, where he studied during 1881-84, wrote, “Narendra is really a genius. I have travelled far and

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<sup>3</sup> Advaita Ashrama (2007) : “Vivekananda : A Biography in Pictures”, Kolkata, India. Page10-13

wide, but I have never 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!”. Similarly, after a discussion with Narendranath, Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar who was the doctor of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa during his last days, reportedly said, “I could never have thought that such a young boy had read so much!”

During his studies, he had varied interests and a wide range of scholarship in philosophy, history, social sciences, arts, literature, and other subjects. Brajendra Nath Sheel a renowned philosopher was his friend and senior. He evinced much interest in scriptural texts like the Upanishads, the Puranas, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. During his early years he became familiar with Western philosophy and science, and refused to accept anything without rational proof and pragmatic test. Even, he questioned the validity of superstitious customs and discrimination based on caste and religion, when he was very young. He was well versed in classical music, both vocal and instrumental. Since boyhood, he took an active interest in physical exercise, sports, and other organizational activities.

Narendranath is said to have studied the writings of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Baruch Spinoza, Georg W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, and Charles Darwin. **Poetry of Wordsworth** and Percy Shelley was the source of his spiritual enquiry. Narendra became fascinated with the Evolutionism of Herbert Spencer, and translated Spencer’s book on Education into Bengali for Gurudas Chattopadhyaya, his publisher. Narendra also had correspondence with Herbert Spencer for some time. Alongside his study of Western philosophers, he was thoroughly acquainted with Indian Sanskrit scriptures and many Bengali works.

He studied different religious and philosophical systems of East and the West; he even met different religious leaders also. His mind was drawn to the spiritual ideals of meditation, non-attachment at an early age and his initial beliefs were shaped by Brahma Samaj, which believed in formless God, deprecated the worship of idols and devoted itself to socio-religious reforms.

His contact with western thought, which lays particular emphasis on the supremacy of reason, brought about a severe conflict in Narendranath. His inborn tendency towards spirituality and his respect for the ancient traditions and beliefs of his religion on the one side, and his argumentative nature coupled with his sharp intellect which hated superstition and questioned simple faith on the other, were now at war with each other. Under the influence of the Brahma Samaj, an important socio-religious organization of 19th century Bengal, he met Devendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen, the leaders of Brahma Samaj and enquired about the existence of God, but he could not get convincing answers<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Swami Gambhiranand, Yug Nayak Swami Vivekanand, Volume-1, Ram Krishna Math, Nagpur, Page-82

His first introduction to Ramakrishna occurred in a literature class, when he heard Principal Hastie lecturing on William Wordsworth's poem "The Excursion" and the poet's nature-mysticism. In the course of explaining the word "trance" in the poem, Hastie told his students that if they wanted to know the real meaning of it, they should go to Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar. This prompted some of his students, including Narendranath to visit Sri Ramakrishna.

At this juncture, with this brief recapitulation about Narendranath Dutta, I would like to come to the idea, I presented in the beginning of this paper. Qualities of Naren, which impressed Sri Ramakrishna to chose him as his message bearer. Narendranath was gifted with a multiplicity of talents and he cultivated them all. His leonine beauty was matched by his courage; he had the build of an athlete, a delightful voice, and a brilliant intellect. His interests ranged from fencing, wrestling, rowing, games, physical exercise, cooking and organizing dramas to instrumental and vocal music, love of philosophic discussion, and criticism. In all these he was an undisputed leader.

Among all the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, Narendranath alone doubted him till his last and criticized any of his teachings that appeared irrational. Firmly poised as he was in the knowledge of the highest truth, Sri Ramakrishna, however, did not upset the intellectual outbursts of Narendranath and never asked Narendranath to abandon his reason. On the other hand, he enjoyed his criticisms, and even encouraged him to question. He told him, "Test me as the money changers test their coins. You must not accept me until you have tested me thoroughly."

The holistic development of personality, healthy body and mind, brahmcharya, scientific attitude, leadership, reasoning, command over the subject, oratory skills, interest in various creative activity, self respect, high moral values, spiritual pursuit and much more to be added to prepare an exhaustive list of the qualities of Naren. He is the perhaps the only living testimony of a human being imbibe with so much qualities altogether in past few centuries.

He was an inspiring personality to the youth, who were restless to uproot the British Power from India a century back. Mahatama Gandhi and Subhash Chandra Bose both were greatly influenced by his approach and ideas. We have recently celebrated 150th year of his birth in 2013, since then India is under the influence of yet another wave of change. Indian youth need to develop the matching personality of Narenranath Dutta to make India powerful, respectful, and progressive nation. Perhaps this will be our real tribute to the great soul