

Swami Vivekananda and the French Language

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*‘To understand Europe, one has to understand her through France, the fountainhead of everything that is highest in the West’.*¹

France held a very special place in the heart of Swami Vivekananda as is evident from his writings about the country in *The East and the West* (1909). Swami Vivekananda believed, ‘France is the home of liberty’ and declared—‘it is certainly true that if anyone has to give the world any new idea, this Paris is *the* place for its dissemination’². This article explores Swamiji’s relationship with the French language which began long before he set his foot on the French soil.

French is one language which attracted Swami Vivekananda so much that he went through the process of learning and re-learning it throughout his life. About three years after the *mahāsamādhi* of his *guru* Sri Ramakrishnadev in 1886, Vivekananda left the monastery at Baranagore in 1890 and became a *parivrājak* (a wandering monk). He travelled across the length and breadth of India. One fine day in 1891 his *gurubhais* received a four-page letter. Swami Shivananda had recounted that none of them could make out in what language it was written. Shashi Maharaj (Swami Ramakrishnananda) and Sarada Maharaj (Swami Trigunatitananda) had an elementary knowledge of French. After examining the letter closely they were of the opinion that it seemed to be written by Naren in French. They had run to get the

letter deciphered by Aghore Chatterji who was the only well-known French scholar in Kolkata (then known as Calcutta) at that time. The letter revealed that his travels had taken Swamiji to Porbunder where he met the administrator of Limbdy, Sri Shankar Pandurang. Sri Pandurang, apart from being a Sanskrit scholar, was well-versed in both French and German. It was he who urged the young monk to learn French because that was the language of scholarship in Europe and Vivekananda was beginning to realize by that time that if he wanted to spread the teaching of his Master, he must make a move Westward.³

Thus Swami Shivananda’s account in the *Life of Swami Vivekananda* shows that Swamiji had already learnt enough French to write a letter as early as in 1891.⁴ In his book *Srimat Vivekananda Swamijir Jivaner Ghatanabali*, Swamiji’s brother Mahendranath Dutta had reminisced that in his youth Narendranath used to buy books of French recipes divided into separate volumes.⁵ Whether his interest in cooking took him closer to the French culture at a young age or vice versa cannot be determined for certain, but culinary skills and music play a significant role in French culture and Swami Vivekananda was interested in both. In fact, there is another story which says that in October 1892 a wandering monk had taken refuge in the house of Haripada Mitra, the sub-divisional officer of the forest department in Belgaon. Among his belongings were only a *kamandalu* and a book wrapped carefully in

a piece of saffron cloth. It had taken some time for Mr Mitra to discover that the book was a volume on French classical music and the monk was none other than Swami Vivekananda.⁶

These accounts so far give us the impression that by 1891 Swami Vivekananda knew French quite well. However, in his July 1894 letter to the Hale sisters we find him making fun of his knowledge of the language and writing in a jovial mood—‘What nonsense was the song Harriet taught me “dans la plaine”; . . . I told it to a French scholar, and he laughed and laughed till the fellow was well-nigh burst at my wonderful translation. That is the way you would have taught me French.’⁷

It was in 1895 that Swamiji visited France for the first time. He was there to attend Francis Leggett’s marriage to Elizabeth MacLeod, both of whom he got acquainted with during his first visit to the United States. His *sejour* in France in August 1895 was short and did not present before him any opportunity to practise the native tongue. From his letters to Francis Leggett as well as to E.T. Sturdy we get to know that he was scheduled to visit London once the marriage ceremony was over. It was in London where he spent the summer of 1896 re-learning and practising French. In the 2nd volume of *Londone Vivekananda*, Mahendranath Dutta mentions Miss Muller from whom Vivekananda took French lessons.⁸ Next, we find mention of him learning French in a letter written in September 1899. He wrote to Mary Hale ‘Again I am going to learn French. If I fail to do it this year, I cannot “do” the Paris Exposition next year properly. Well, I expect to learn much French here where even the servants talk it.’⁹ In November 1899 he wrote to Sister Christine, ‘I am determined to be a French and German scholar. French, I think, I can manage with the help of a

dictionary.’¹⁰ His need to learn and ‘manage’ French was evident since Swami Vivekananda was an invited speaker at the Congress of the History of World Religions to be held in Paris the next year, ie, in 1900. In March 1900 he had written to Mary Hale from San Francisco, ‘Harriet is going to have a good time in Paris. I am sure to meet her over there and *parler francaise!* I am getting by heart a French *dictionnaire*’ and in April 1900 he wrote to Sister Nivedita, ‘Mrs Leggett thinks I ought to immediately take up studying French’¹¹ But Swamiji was already confident of ‘going to conquer the Froggies (French)’¹² because his acquaintance with the language dated a long time back.

Swami Vivekananda landed in Paris for the second time on 3 August, 1900. He sent a message in French announcing his arrival to his hostess Mrs Leggett—‘ARRIVE A HUIT HRES’¹³ (Arriving at 8 o’ clock). For us this message is the earliest available proof of Swamiji’s acquaintance with the language. Back home, the *Indian Mirror* in its 3 July, 1900 edition had printed a line—‘Swami Vivekananda has been invited to represent Hinduism and Vedanta in the Paris exhibition and the Swami will deliver an address in French.’¹⁴ This fact was even corroborated by the *Indian Spectator* (8 July, 1900)¹⁵. This proves that it was a general consensus that Swami Vivekananda knew French well enough to deliver a speech in Paris before an international audience. Surprisingly, it was Vivekananda himself who kept on insisting that he was still ‘trying to learn French’ sitting in Paris in August 1900. On 28 August, he wrote to Sister Nivedita—‘Some are very appreciative already’¹⁶. Swamiji was scheduled to speak on 7 September and on 1 September we find him writing to Swami Turiyananda—‘I shall stay with the French to pick up their language . . . I have somewhat mastered the

French language; but if I stay among the French for a month or two, I shall be able to carry on conversation well.¹⁷ This prompted him to take up lodging with M. Jules Bois a few days before the Congress began. But what exactly happened in the Congress? There is no available text of the presentation made by Swami Vivekananda in Paris in either English or French. The December 1900 issue of the *Vedanta Work* journal printed in Paris published the news—‘We learn that Swami Vivekananda twice addressed the Philosophic Section of the Exposition Universelle and that his lectures were much appreciated.’¹⁸ However, Swamiji himself wrote a letter to *Udbodhan* in 1900 describing the Conference. That letter, written in the form of a report, stated—

Swami Vivekananda was invited by the Paris Congress to contradict this conviction [that the Vedic religion is the outcome of the worship of fire], and he promised to read a paper on the subject. But he could not keep his promise on account of ill health, and with difficulty was only able to be personally present at the Congress. . . .¹⁹

Had he delivered a speech like he did in Chicago in 1893, it would surely have been reproduced in the *Actes du Congress*. The report of the Congress does not mention Swami Vivekananda as a speaker. However, Vivekananda was not a silent listener either. He responded to Professor Gustave Oppert’s views on the origin of the worship of the *shālagrāma*. He was quite annoyed with Oppert’s theory and found it necessary to protest. But what is bewildering is the fact that Swamiji had mastered French so well that he could understand what Oppert said and in turn protest against it and put forward his own views in a language in which he never claimed absolute proficiency. In fact his *Memoirs of European Travel* written after he left Paris records—

It was my cherished desire to remain in Paris for some time and study the French language and civilization; I left my old friends and acquaintances and put up with a new friend [Jules Bois], a Frenchman of ordinary means, who knew no English, and my French—well, it was something quite extraordinary! I had this in mind that the inability to live like a dumb man would naturally force me to talk French, and I would attain fluency in that language in no time; but on the contrary I am on tour.²⁰

This account was written after the Conference was over. It is one of the several unsolved mysteries associated with the genius of Swami Vivekananda about which scholars are clueless even to this day!

Friendship with Emma Calvé

Another surprising aspect associated with Swamiji’s French connection was his friendship with Emma Calvé, the renowned opera singer of 19th century Europe. Swamiji has himself said that: ‘French is a language of the civilized world, the mark of gentility in the West, and everybody knows it; consequently these two ladies [Emma Calvé and Sarah Bernhardt] have neither the leisure nor the inclination to learn English.’²¹ Not only Madame Calvé or Miss Bernhardt but Charles Loyson (better known as Père Hyacinth) or M. Jules Bois—none of them spoke English. Yet it is with them that Swamiji shared great intimacy and went on a tour to Egypt, Greece and Constantinople after the Paris Congress was over. His *Memoirs of European Travel* talks at great length of his fellow-travellers and his interactions with them. In one of Sister Nivedita’s letters we find, ‘We spent the evening with Mme. Calvé. She says Swami *must* learn French.’²² However, overcoming the barrier of language, the Swami had influenced Madame Calvé to such an extent that she had learnt by heart ‘*Om Hari Om Tat Sat*’ and among her private papers in

French was found a piece of paper written:

Aum! Aum! Om

Asato mā sadgamaya

Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya

Mrityor māmritam gamaya

(*Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, I, 3)²³

[Lead us from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality]. It was to this Madame Calvé that Swami Vivekananda had written ‘sa premiere phrase en français’ in the words of Jules Bois. In October 1900 Swami Vivekananda had written—

Ma chère Mademoiselle,

J’ai été très heureuse et très content ici. J’avais le plu(s) bon temps après quelque année.

Je trouve vie propre avec M. Bois, les livres, le calme et l’absence de tout ce qui m’a troublé.

Mais je ne sais pas quel destine m’attend maintenant.

Cett est drôle, ma lettre, mais il est mon essai premier.

Votre fidele,
Vivekananda²⁴

[My Dear Mademoiselle,

I have been very happy and content here. I am having the best of times after many years.

I find life here with Mr. Bois very satisfactory—the books, the calm and the absence of everything that usually troubles me.

But I do not know what kind of destiny is waiting for me now.

My letter is funny, isn’t it? But it is my first attempt.

Yours faithfully,
Vivekananda]

If this letter written in October 1900 was his first attempt at writing French to a French woman, then possibly his comments on Oppert’s paper were not in French because this letter indicates proficiency in the language at an elementary level.

Mahendranath Datta has written, ‘Swamiji had occasions to talk with big men of various countries. Therefore it had become needful for him to know the French language; and it is a matter of great surprise that he had mastered the language very well.’²⁵ Manmatha Nath Ganguli recounts in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*,

They wanted to convene another Parliament of Religions in France. They had thought of making it a convention at Paris to make it compulsory for the speakers to address the House in the French language. I did not know French at the time. And they thought that my ignorance of the language would debar me from the Parliament. But I went to France and picked up the language in about six months and then began to deliver some speeches in French.²⁶

This was supposedly spoken by Swami Vivekananda himself. But this statement is far too faulty as can be clearly understood from the letters of Swamiji already discussed here. Furthermore, he never got the opportunity to stay in France for six months to pick up the language. Ganguli’s report was based on the general legend that Swami Vivekananda was thoroughly proficient in French. The legend was so popular that it prompted *Indian Mirror* to publish such a piece of news on 12 December, 1900 that Swami Vivekananda had delivered ‘very impressive and eloquent lectures in French in Paris’²⁷. It is unsupported by any proof till date as is his lectures in Scutari, Turkey. It is possible that the lecture on 2 November, 1900 at the American College for Women was in French. That was the language of the medium of instruction in Turkey at that point of time and the other two speakers delivered their addresses in French. However, even Halide Edib, who was among the students who attended Swamiji’s lecture in Scutari and later wrote about her memory of the great sage in the *Memoirs of Halide Edib*,

did not throw any light on the language in which Swamiji spoke.

The best example of Swami Vivekananda's acquaintance with the French language can be found in his four-page letter to Sister Christine written on 14 October, 1900, days before leaving Paris. This letter was a sudden progress from the one written to Emma Calvé, demonstrating an advanced level of proficiency in the language. It was written with cordiality and warmth, addressed to a person with whom he shared a very good friendship. He informed her that he was leaving Paris on 29 October with Mademoiselle Calvé, Mademoiselle MacLeod and M. Jules Bois—« Nous irons a Constantinople, asia-Grece et Egypt. Au retour nous visiteron Venice. » ('We will go to Constantinople, Asia, Greece and Egypt. On our way back we will visit Venice). In this letter he spoke of his state of mind, his philosophy and his future plans too—« J'envoie aux Inde tout l'argent que je gagne au amerique et je suis maintenant libre, le moin mendicant comme avant. » ('I am sending all the money I earned in America to India and now I am free, the begging-monk as before.') But it is in this letter that Swami Vivekananda has confessed—

Il est possible que je donne queleque conferences a Paris apres mon retour. Mais aura en anglaise, je pense, avec un traducteur.

Je n'avais ni les temps, ni pouvoir a prendre queleque langue nouvelle a mon age. Je suis un veillard, n'est-ce pas?²⁸

('It is possible that I will give some lectures in Paris after I return. But they will be in English, I think, with an interpreter.

I have neither the time nor the ability to learn a new language at my age. I am old, isn't it?')

Swamiji could sense that his exit from this world was not very far. The enthusiasm with which he had embarked on his voyage to France had diminished to a great extent by November 1900 and the trip was cut short as he was desperate to return to India. Several years after his worldly demise, among his papers was discovered an unfinished story in Bengali titled 'Shiver Bhoot'. It was about a baron named 'K' who longed for happiness. The one-page story abruptly ends with K's journey to Paris in search of happiness.²⁹ Perhaps the incomplete story is symbolic of Swami Vivekananda's unfulfilled desire to stay in France and learn French the way he had wanted to. ■

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