

## Swami Vivekananda as Translator

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‘**A**rise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached’—all of us are aware of this message from Swami Vivekananda. We even know that this was Swamiji’s own translation of the verse from the *Katha Upanishad*—‘*Uttishthata jāgrata prāpya varānnibodhata*’. Yet, Swami Vivekananda’s translation skill has never been given its proper due. He has to his credit quite a few original works in both Bengali and English. His fluency in the English language and his oratory skills had made his fame spread across the seas in that era. Several speeches delivered by him on foreign soil had attracted his listeners so much towards his style of oration that they had overlooked the fact that in reality Swami Vivekananda was an excellent translator of Indian philosophy and scriptures. His skill as a translator was manifest in the manner in which he interpreted ancient Indian scriptures and Indian philosophy in general in English.

It would be wrong to assume that Swami Vivekananda’s translation activities began only after he set foot on foreign soil. Indeed it had started long back when the sudden demise of his father had left him helpless and desperate for money. In 1884 Narendranath Dutta passed his B.A. examination and in that year itself lost his father. The situation was adverse to such an extent that the family literally struggled to survive. Narendranath took up the task of translating books as a means of earning some money. He translated *Education—Intellectual, Moral and Physical* by Herbert

Spencer (1820-1903), one of the greatest philosophers of 19th century England, into Bengali and titled the book *Shiksha*.

Just after taking his Entrance examinations Narendranath had sent a letter to Spencer stating his difference of opinion with him. Spencer had accepted the reasoning of the young man and had even assured him of incorporating the necessary changes in the subsequent editions (Basu 71). The reminiscences of Mahendranath Dutta, Sister Nivedita, and Sister Christine too mention the profound impact of Herbert Spencer’s philosophy on Narendranath. Naturally, when Narendranath decided to earn money by translating books, the first book he chose was Spencer’s *Education*. Noted Vivekananda scholar Sri Sankari Prasad Basu has commented that, on the one hand his personal preference for Spencer, and on the other his unwillingness to accept God as the ultimate Truth without any proof—these two reasons prompted Narendranath Dutta to translate Spencer’s book based on scientific reasoning and logic. (169)

Published by the renowned publishing house Basumati, *Shiksha* is widely known to be Swami Vivekananda’s original Bengali work. It is unknown to the majority that this book is in fact a translation of an English book and that is why it holds greater significance. At a time when English education was being enforced upon the Indian subjects by their British rulers, the translation of the most celebrated contemporary book on education in English language was indeed a decisive step.

Narendranath had refrained from translating the entire book, it was an abridged version. Moreover, while translating the book, he had taken liberties according to his needs. The subtitle of the original book ‘Intellectual, Moral and Physical’ has been excluded in the Bengali translation.

In the chapter on ‘Physical Education’, Spencer wrote—‘The ill-fed Hindoo goes down before the Englishmen fed on more nutritive food, to whom he is as inferior in mental as in physical energy.’ (Spencer 191) Naturally Narendranath was the last person to take this insult and he had strongly objected to such an opinion of an Englishman. Not only he had let his objection known to Spencer beforehand in his letter, he skillfully changed the portion while translating. What he wrote in his Bengali translation was more or less like this—the non-vegetarian races have always been more powerful than the Hindus fed on relatively less nutritious food (*Shiksha* 91).

This incident demonstrated why young Narendranath deliberately chose to translate Spencer’s book. He had asked for his permission and Mahendranath Dutta’s *Srimat Vivekananda Swamijir Jivaner Ghatanabali* clearly mentions that Herbert Spencer had sent a letter granting his permission to translate his book. The letter had also mentioned that he had not seen any Indian so well-versed in English and so he would be delighted to have his book translated by Narendranath. This incident demonstrated young Narendranath’s strength of character, personality and indomitable spirit besides his scholarship.

Around the same time he had submitted a commentary on and Bengali translation of Jaidev’s *Geetgovindam* to Motilal Basu. Mahendranath Dutta had reminisced that when Narendranath had decided to take up the reins of the family by translating books after the untimely death of his father in 1884, he had written a commentary on

*Geetgovindam* and had also translated it into Bengali. Motilal Basu had published it from his own press. However, the book is no longer available (Dutta 191). Except this solitary reference given by Mahendranath, we have no other information about Vivekananda’s *Geetgovindam*. This is an instance where lack of awareness has deprived us of the opportunity of reading another great piece of literary merit by Swami Vivekananda.

### *Isha Anusaran*

Narendranath Dutta’s next published translation was *Isha Anusaran*. Six chapters of *The Imitation of Christ* was translated and published in volume 1, issues 1-5, of the monthly Bengali magazine *Sahitya Kalpadrum* (1889). Later the six chapters were compiled together and published as *Isha Anusaran* in the 6th volume of Swami Vivekananda’s *Bani O Rachana*.

It should be noted that in case of each translation there was a reason behind the choice of texts. The book *Bangla Bhashay Bibekananda Charcha* mentions that the way the disciples of Christ had united after His death had influenced the disciples of the Paramahansa to get united under the leadership of Naren after the death of Sri Ramakrishnadev. This had prompted Narendranath to translate *The Imitation of Christ* (22). In the Introduction to his Bengali translation, Narendranath had clearly stated that the ill-behaviour of the British administrators in India and their attitude towards Indians have led the general Indians to hold the Christians in disregard and it might prompt them to hate the Christian religion. However, through his translation of a book on Christianity he wanted to uphold the benevolent side of the religion and spread the message of love and generosity as propagated by Jesus himself (*Bani O Rachana* 13).

As a translator he was careful enough to

include notes on all sentences mentioning specific Biblical references such as ‘Trinity’, ‘Law’, ‘Judgement’, ‘Eternal World’ or ‘Manna’. Even *shlokas* from the *Bhagavadgītā* have been cited in the footnotes of the translated text to make readers understand the essential unity between the Vedic and the Christian ideologies. For example, *The Imitation of Christ* begins like this: ‘He that followeth Me walketh not in darkness, saith the Lord’ (1). The translated text cites from the *Gītā*—‘*Daivi hyeshā gunamayi mama māyā duratyayā / māmeva ye prapadyante māyāmetām taranti te.*’ (7:14) In Narendranath’s thoughts there existed a synthesis of the Vedic and the Christian ideologies and we could discover it later from the writings of Sister Nivedita also. In her book *Notes on Some Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda*, Nivedita has written down her conversation with Swamiji while travelling with him in 1898. Swamiji has said—‘Yes, almost all Christianity is Aryan, I believe.’ (77) His effort to unify the two religions had begun with *Isha Anusaran*.

Later most of the translations done by Swamiji have been from Indian languages into English. It all began at the dais of the historic speech at Chicago. On September 11, 1893, he had said:

The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world, of the wonderful doctrine preached in the *Gītā*: ‘*Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.*’ (*Chicago Addresses* 21)

[*Ye yathā mām prapadyante tāmstathaiva bhajāmyaham / Mama vartmānuvartante manushyāh Pārtha sarvashah.*] (*Gītā* 4:11)

#### At the Chicago Congress

In the speeches delivered at the Chicago

Congress, Swamiji had translated a total of 14 Sanskrit verses extempore in English. It ranged from the *Gītā* to the Upanishads (*Kathopanishad*, *Mundakopanishad* and *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad*), *Shiva Mahimnah Stotram*, *Rig Veda*, *Mahānirvāna Tantra*, *Mahābhārata* and *Vedānta Sutra*. Thus, the famous *shloka* from the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad*—‘*shrinvantu vishve amritasya putrā / ā ye dhāmāni divyāni tasthuh*’ [2.5] gets known to the world as ‘Hear, ye children of immortal bliss! even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion.’ (*Chicago Addresses* 35) or, Yudhishtira’s philosophy ‘*Dharma eva manah krishne svabhāvāchchaiva me dhritam / dharmavānījyako hina jaghanya dharmavādinam*’ (‘*Vanaparva, Mahābhārata* 31.2.5) is translated to the foreign listeners in this way—‘I do not pray for anything; I do not ask for anything. Let Him place me wherever He likes. I must love Him for love’s sake. I cannot trade in love.’ (*Chicago Addresses* 37)

During his travels in 1898, Swamiji was in a mood to translate the Vedas for his Western disciples. Sister Nivedita writes in her *Notes on Some Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda* on 12 June, 1898:

On Sunday afternoon, we rested near the plains . . . above a lake and fall, and there he translated for us the Rudra prayer. . . . He hesitated a long time over the fourth line, thinking of rendering it, ‘Embrace us in the heart of our heart’. But at last he put his perplexity to us saying shyly, ‘The real meaning is: Reach us through and through our self’. He had evidently feared that this sentence, with its extraordinary intensity, might not make good sense in English. (41)

But his rendition indeed left a profound impact on his listeners that afternoon, particularly Sister Nivedita. The Rudra prayer found in *Yajur-Veda* ‘*Asato mā sadgamaya / tamaso mā jyotirgamaya /*

*mṛityormā amṛitam gamaya / āvirāvirma  
edhi, rudra yatte dakshinam mukham tena  
mām pāhi nityam*’ was translated as:

From the Unreal lead us to the Real.  
From darkness lead us unto light.  
From death lead us to immortality.  
Reach us through and through our self.  
And evermore protect us—Oh Thou  
Terrible!—  
From ignorance, by Thy sweet  
compassionate Face (42)

‘The Hymn of Sweetness’ found in the *Rig-Veda* (I.90. 6-9), *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* (VI.3.6) and the *Mahānārāyana Upanishad* (Section XXXIX: Trisuparna Mantra) was also translated in the same afternoon. Nivedita writes—‘It was indeed an afternoon of translations, and he gave us fragments of the great benediction after mourning, which is one of the most beautiful of the Hindu sacraments’:

The blissful winds are sweet to us.  
The seas are showering bliss on us.  
May the corn in our fields bring bliss to us.  
May the plants and herbs bring bliss to us.  
May the cattle give us bliss.  
O Father in Heaven be Thou blissful unto  
us!  
Thy very dust of the earth is full of bliss.  
It is all bliss—all bliss—all bliss. (43)

In the request of his dear friend Jagadish Chandra Bose, Swami Vivekananda later translated the ‘Nāsadiya Sukta’ of the *Rig-Veda* (X.129). About this translation, he wrote to Mrs. Ole Bull from Mayavati on January 6, 1901—‘I send you forthwith a translation of the *Nasadiya* Hymn sent by Dr. Bose through you. I have tried to make it as literal as possible.’ (*Letters of Swami Vivekananda* 447) His translation was named ‘The Hymn of Creation’. ‘*Nāsadasinno sadāsittadānim nāsitrajo no vyomā paro yat / Kimāvarivah kuhakasya sharmannambhah kimāsīd gahanam gabhiram*’(1) was translated by Vivekananda as ‘Existence was not then, nor

non-existence, / The world was not, the sky beyond was neither. / What covered the mist? Of whom was that? / What was in the depths of darkness thick?’ (*In Search of God* 76) Through his translations Swamiji not only opened up the poetic beauty of the Vedic hymns to his Western audience or readers, but also made them aware of the profound philosophy of the Vedic Rishis which was hitherto unknown to most of the Western world. For the benefit of his Western disciples and devotees he had effortlessly translated not just Vedic hymns but also lyrical poems of the Bhakti poets such as Surdās, Tulsidās, Rāmprasād, love poems of Rādhā-Krishna and even songs of Tansen. Nivedita writes—‘In matters Indian he would rather put forward, in its extreme form, at the beginning of our experience, all that it might seem impossible for European minds to enjoy. Thus he would quote, for instance, some verse—

On one side grows the hair  
In long black curls,  
And on the other, corded like rope. . .  
For He, the Lord, took a form,  
And that was a divided form,  
Half-woman and half-man.’ (5-6)

This was how the concept of *ardhanārishvara* was explained to the foreigners by Swamiji. Again, by the touch of his pen, Surdās’s bhakti song ‘*Prabhu mera avgun chit nā dharo, / samadarshi hay nām tihāro, ab mohi par karo*’ becomes ‘O Lord, look not upon my evil qualities! / Thy name, O Lord, is Same-sightedness’ (*Notes* 43) or Tulsi’s poem becomes ‘Therefore, Tulsi, take thou care to live with / all, for who can tell where, or in what garb, / the Lord Himself may next come to thee?’ (62) The popular Rādhā-Krishna love-lore was presented before his foreign audience as ‘They have made Radha queen, in the beautiful groves of Brindaban. / At her gate stands Krishna, on guard.’ (7) He had even translated his friend, the famous Bengali

playwright of the 19th century, Girish Ghose's poem on Radha-Krishna as the 'Chorus of the Cowherds':

Men: Thou art the Soul of souls.  
Thou yellow-garbed,  
With thy blue eyes.  
Women: Thou dark One! Thou  
Shepherd of Brindaban!  
Kneeling at the feet of the  
Shepherdesses. (8)

Apart from these, portions of Bhartriharis' *Vairāgya Shatakam* (Nos 14-15, 18, 24-26, 31, 33), Shankarāchārya's *Nirvānashatkam* and Patanjali's *Yogasutra* have been translated into English by Swamiji. The 'Six Stanzas on Nirvana' explain the ultimate truth of the Absolute: 'I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute—/ I am He, I am He (*Shivoham, Shivoham*) [*In Search of God* 78]. In October 1898, in Kashmir, Swamiji translated for his disciples the 'Hundred Verses on Renunciation' (*Vairāgya*

*Shatakam*), later published as 'Renunciation Alone is Fearless': 'In enjoyment is the fear of disease, / In high birth, the fear of losing caste, . . . / In the body, the fear of death. / In this life all is fraught with fear: / Renunciation alone is fearless.' (*In Search of God* 81). To quote Nivedita, '. . . carried by his burning enthusiasm it was possible to enter into these things, and dimly, even then, to apprehend their meaning.' (*Notes* 6)

In conclusion it can be said, Vivekananda's role as a translator did not remain confined only to the English language. His eagerness to master French and German, his engagement with the French language and his letters in French remind us again and again that language could never act as a barrier for such a great man as Swami Vivekananda. 'I am determined to be a French and German scholar'—his desire was indeed a manifestation of his skill, his *connaissance* of and mastery over languages and above all his natural flair for translation. ■

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